The Fallout
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Summary

Hermione learns about growing up through the redemption of Draco Malfoy.

One

Hour: One

When does war begin?

Hermione thinks she could probably trace it back to her first year at Hogwarts, because a war began then, when Harry first met Voldemort as an opponent rather than a child. Or, perhaps, it was when Hermione first received her Hogwarts acceptance letter; when a young girl saw her world change, and the wizarding world saw another Mudblood. Or maybe it was when Dumbledore was murdered on a tower, in a structure of what was to be a haven for the Light.

Maybe it is bigger than just them though. War. Perhaps the first war just never really ended. Maybe it began with the start of time and the first Muggle-born. Tonks will tell her, days and days from now, that war just never stops - it builds, climaxes, ebbs, and builds again. But Hermione is not the sort of person who can believe in a world that can find no peace.

She watches the spirals of smoke, the wreckage of buildings, the blank air for a Dumbledore that is not there, the useless healer squad, the fires that climb the sides of the shops and homes until that is all you see, and then the team of Aurors that have come too late. She watches the Mark, bold and ugly above the chaos, and Moody's face grave and lined and spoiled with the acid of battles and hardships.

Ron's fingers are twisted in the fabric at the back of her shirt, and Harry stands just ahead of them like the last solid structure in the entire city.

And Hermione *knows*, with Lavender muffling her cries behind the scarf she has found under ash (*Parvati… Parvati… Parvati,* she says over and over again), that *this* is the start of war.

Day: 14; Hour: 8

It is over two weeks before the Ministry declares war. The Minister's voice is low and pressured, even when he tries to sound uplifting. Ginny sits and squeezes the carpet between her toes, and it is the only sound in the stillness of the room besides the crackle of the Wizarding Wireless Network and the rustle of Harry's clothes as he places his head in his hands.

Day: 24; Hour: 9

They have been in an Auror training program for ten days. Harry excels, Ron is easily frustrated, and Hermione is scared - though no one knows it.

The beginning is a period of confusion, and mixed up opinions that begin to erode and whitewash, until everyone is very unsure of where beliefs have taken everyone around them.

Hermione stands with Harry and Ron, with the Order, because this is where she belongs - but it still surprises her to watch some of the faces of friends and enemies come and go as they decide where it is they belong as well.

Day: 35; Hour: 7

"What are you doing here, Malfoy?" The words are hissed and furious, and spit flies into his face.

Malfoy is in a rage as well. At first, he had been calm and unaffected, as if he had been relaxing on holiday instead of undergoing an interrogation. Once they realized the strong, burly looking Aurors weren't going to crack him, they brought in two men with a little more attitude. A little more of an anger problem.

Malfoy obviously doesn't appreciate the total lack of respect for him, his family, his person, or his space. His body has begun to tighten, the muscles pulling and contracting. It progresses, until his face has become hot red and his veins are throbbing green and blue on his neck, and his knuckles are white in their clutch to one another.

"We've got your little whore girlfriend with her arse up in the air a room over, begging us to fuck her for a pardon. I've heard how much you like cock, Mal-fuck, but you won't be getting off so easy. You'll be taking it like a bitch for your fellow Death Eaters in Azkaban by the end of the night instead." It is whispered in phlegm-cracked vowels in his ear, breathing spittle on his skin, the rage like a palpable storm around the three men.

The other Auror grins and leans back over, an inch away from his face, and sneers. "Unless you want to give us the information we want. Then we'll just let your inbred daddy have at your lily-white arse--"

"Get the *fuck* out of my face," Malfoy seethes, jerking forward just enough to hit his nose off the other man's.

It is the first time he has spoken in two hours, and his voice trembles with all the emotions that look as if they are trying to claw their way out of his skin.

"*Oh*," the Auror pulls back, laughing. "Thought of daddy's cock gets you a little excited--"

A trail of milky white, tinged with red, glides down the Auror's face in a sickly trail of phlegm and blood. There is a second, a pause of still air, where a person can swear the world has paused and is now free floating in time. Then, like glass breaking or a building exploding, the moment is thrown back into animated life.

Rapidly, Malfoy and the chair he is bound to are thrown backwards to the ground, and then the first Auror is throttling him. Big, scarred hands are wrapped tightly around that structured column of muscle and delicate bones, cutting off Malfoy's air supply. Blood froths at the corners of his mouth, and though his face is even redder from lack of oxygen, he looks pleased. That is until his cheekbone is shattered under those huge, imposing knuckles. Then he is back to being angry, but with no way to move his body to do anything about it.

The second Auror is yelling obscenities and Malfoy slander, but moves not an inch to mend the situation. Hermione is standing from her seat without realizing she is even doing so, her eyes wide and trained on the blond, because she is somehow sure that this will be the last anyone sees of him alive.

Then the door breaks into the room, and there are several men and then several more. Malfoy is dead, she thinks, his eyes shut and black rimming his neck. The first Auror, with the spit still trailing down the side of his face, has taken to attacking the wall when he is forced to stay away from the blond. The second is still, but eyes the rushing crowd with the floating son of a Death Eater as if he might Avada them all.

"Well," Hermione hardly hears over her own bewilderment and the surprised rush of her breath, but she manages to turn her eyes back to Kingsley, "I believe this went fairly well until the Auror lost control."

Hermione agrees. Ron is laughing at her side. Neville is in a slow state of shock to her right. Behind her, several more friends and allies in training who breathe in the same bit of silence.

"Why didn't they just use Veritaserum?" Neville whispers.

"Because of you lot. You're going to have to know how to interrogate without having truth serum on hand. We wanted you to see a real interrogation, and

considering how long it may be before we get a..." Kingsley pauses as Moody stepped into the doorway of the other room. "Briefly - we decided to forego the potion, so you have a better understanding on tactics."

"That is really the best sort when it comes to the ferret." Ron grins and snickers into his hand.

Hermione sends him a sharp look, because this is far from a joke or a Hogwarts rivalry. This is real. This is life and death for another person, and it isn't anything to laugh about, no matter who the person might be.

"Timsfield is bound to be suspended without pay now. Not unless our lives are in danger are we allowed to attack a suspect or a prisoner. We must *always* maintain our self-control, even if other people or the situation is out of control. That goes with *everything*. As new members of the Order, you will be forced into situations much worse than this. Never. Lose. Control."

Day: 35; Hour: 8

There is a line through the world, she knows. She thinks this is clear now, though training and past experiences with Snape have told her that this line is not so easily defined.

Malfoy is the first she has seen from the other side that she both knows as a person, and knows that he did not come from in between but from the side of his father. She does not think she should have been surprised to see him there, but she had been. It has not been long since the last time, but she spent so much time looking at him for change, because so much has happened since. *He* has done so much since.

Ron is lighthearted because he knows Azkaban and torture stories, and repeats them out loud with Malfoy as the main character. Harry is quiet in the armchair, and it is with anger that he contemplates what he would have done had he been with her and Ron during the interrogation. Hermione is afraid of his anger, because it will grow, and there is already too much rage inside of him.

Day: 42; Hour: 1

Ron is the first to go fight, and all by chance because he was at the Ministry when the Aurors received the alert. Arthur said he had been excited to go, and would return in a few short hours.

Ron is gone for two days, and it is on the third day that he comes back to the Burrow. His feet are heavy and his voice silent, and the door to his bedroom clicks behind him before he answers any of them.

He does not come out for four days.

Day: 51; Hour: 9

The first time she had seen him in the cell had been the most surprising. They had been down at the holding cells to learn procedures, and how to handle prisoners, when Lavender had seen him. Most of their group consisted of ex-Hogwarts students or alumni, and 'Draco Malfoy' wasn't some thrown together mental image of a male with blond hair and a lot of arrogance. Rather, they knew him in the flesh, and could easily recognize him, even behind bars and prison grime.

He had sat, silent, even when Ron walked past the cell like he were parading his freedom. Hermione hadn't even looked, despite her overwhelming curiosity, and had thought she would do the same on the way back out. There had been a noise though, a scruff of clothing against cement, and she blamed it on that. Though it could have been just in her nature to *look.*

It wasn't remarkable. He had been a little dirty and unkempt, but it wasn't like he was sitting in his own filth and banging his head against the wall. There was nothing mind blowing about his actions at all. He simply sat there, and in her recollection, he hadn't even met her eyes. He had been reading something, pretending as if their presence was below his notice despite it all - perhaps he still felt it was.

It was just the *fact* that was the most jarring. Malfoy was behind bars. Was locked up. Was imprisoned in the Ministry on charges pending. Despite what she knew of him, it had been so shocking to look through thick metal poles and see a face she had seen a thousand times in corridors and packed classrooms. This was war, it told her.

The second time had been to escort the Auror taking her own prisoner down into the cells. Well, it wasn't so much *her* prisoner as a *joint* capture, but she was the only one who saw it through to the end, and the little man with no big part in Voldemort's circle had seemed like such a big deal at the time. She had been proud of herself and a bit smug walking that concrete line.

She had passed by so close he could have merely stuck out his hand and grabbed her by the arm. She was jerked to the left instead, and when she turned her eyes to where the Auror was staring in accusation, she met Malfoy face to face. His long,

browned fingers were wrapped around the dark grey bars, and his face was smudged and mocking. Yet there was something very haunted about him, some characteristic to his expression that chilled her bones, but that she couldn't place. All she knew was that it scared her wits from her, and she only stood and stared for countless seconds that gaped and gaped the lines of endlessness.

He looked as if he were literally biting his tongue. As if there were a million things he wanted to say to try and devastate her, but that he knew he was in absolutely no position to say. Instead, he gave her one of the ugliest faces she had ever seen - an expression that needed no words at all. Her stomach rolled and acid burned the back of her throat.

It was the first time, looking back; she would realize that she always had the biggest reactions to Malfoy. The most intense responses to his actions, and sometimes for what seemed like no reason at all. They were good, or bad, or tremendously horrible, but always the most intense with him.

But for now, all she would realize was the boy in the cage. All she would see was the glint of desperation in his eyes, the tightening of his fingers, the sway of his body forward. She would feel fear rise up and prick her skin in a rush of waves, and have to battle to not step back.

He was a stranger, she saw, and remembers now, as she stares at the empty cell he had been inside. She could swear that she had never seen him before in her life. A stranger. And it had made her feel more cold and more afraid than she had ever felt over anything important so far.

Day: 59; Hour: 9

It is Harry's birthday, and the Burrow is packed with sound and people. Harry is laughing, and when he pulls her up from the couch as Fred puts on some of the worst music she has ever heard, she does not care that she is not a great dancer and will step on his feet - neither does he.

Day: 78; Hour: 8

She has seen Grimmauld Place before, which houses only a few members of the Order. The rest of the rooms are left for offices, emergency guest rooms, or meeting places. Besides a short one-night stay there with Harry and Ron, she has slept at the Burrow since leaving Hogwarts.

Her parents are somewhere that even she does not know the location to - the

Order told her that it was crucial for her parents to be safe and hidden as early as possible. There are also Ministry-approved wards for her other family members, which is the best the Order could do as means of protection for them. With nowhere to stay in the Muggle world, and the need to be in the wizarding one to fight, her most obvious choice had been the Burrow.

The lopsided and dirt-stained siding of the house in front of her is the first bit of evidence she has seen that there are other Order shelters in England. Inside, it radiates starkness. There are no pictures, knick-knacks, or scattered notes on the latest Weasley twin invention. There are no holes or marks on anything that comes with a story, or the smell of a home-cooked meal from the kitchen, or warm colors and soft smiles. There is white, and ugly worn brown, and more white. It is empty, save a purple couch in the living room and a small fireplace. There are shelves that line the hall, but nothing on them, and she meets no other sign of life until the kitchen. There, she finds a table and mismatched chairs, a sliding glass door to the backyard, and a few sorted items that let her know people are here.

"Ah, Lupin. I was wondering when you were going to show." A man stands from the table, worn and hard, and reaches out to shake his hand.

"We had some new information we had to check out first."

"Right. I've got it locked in my room, if you want to follow me…" The man makes his way around the table, not sparing her a glance.

"Hermione, just stay here a moment?" Lupin's fingers squeeze her shoulder warm, and though she is beyond curious as to what the mystery item they are retrieving is, she nods.

She watches the wind blow the branches of a tree from the glass doors, and the howling it makes whipping around the house. There is something about the place that creeps her out, and she thinks she may have gotten too used to the home and comfort of the Burrow. This was more like war, here. Stark and empty. This place houses the people quick on the run or to hide, who had no time or care to bring the small comforts of home with them. She imagines what it must have been like; to leave home, arrive in a place like this, and know that this is the beginning.

"Ready?" She turns, her eyes automatically following to his hands, though they are empty.

"Yes." She follows Lupin's lead back out of the kitchen, and there is a slight *thump* when he passes the hallway.

It is his turn to not spare a glance to the unimportant faces, but Hermione does. Draco Malfoy, and Pansy Parkinson directly over his shoulder, peer back at her. Her heart stops, hammers twice quickly, and starts in on an excited pace. She aligns the clean, scowling, questioning face with the mental picture of a dirt-streaked, scowling, desperate one, and it shakes her a little.

They both genuinely seem as surprised to see her as she is them, though Malfoy less obviously. His stance is protective, and she knows this because she has seen Harry and Ron do it countless times in front of her. He is tense and braced, and she is unsure whether he plans on attacking or being attacked.

She has passed, though, after that briefest second of a glance, and she refuses to look back over her shoulder at them. It is better to pretend they are just as meaningless as Lupin had made them out to be by ignoring them.

She, however, does not ignore their presence once the door is shut and it is just Lupin and her back out on the porch. "Why are they here?"

He sighs, a little weary. "Several reasons, I'm sure. I'm not in the know on all matters, but I would guess it has something to do with what Malfoy was offering."

"Offering?"

"Funding. They gave him Veritaserum, I know that much. He's not after anything but a little peace maybe."

"He doesn't deserve peace." Hermione's voice is harsh and quick, and she feels her cheeks warm with anger and conviction.

"Maybe. The point though, is that they are after bigger things than young Malfoy. They can make an example out of him, or they can use him. It's far more rewarding to our side to choose the latter. I'm sure, if his presence here tells us anything, it is that the Order is now making up for all those money shortages we've been so worried about by having access to a few packed vaults at Gringotts. I'm also sure all this new information being processed at Headquarters is from Malfoy, as well as the three feet of parchment on my desk about how to de-ward the Malfoy Manor."

"So..." Hermione shakes her head. "So, he just gives them some money and he's an Order member now? Meanwhile he *killed*

"No, no. He's been granted immunity. Which means if he doesn't screw up even marginally, he gets to stay in that lovely little house until the end of the war. No more jail time, and no more watching his back for angry Death Eaters."

"The Death Eaters are angry with him? I--"

"Well if they weren't before, I'm sure they are now."

"It doesn't *matter,* Lupin! He-" He turns, his expression stern.

"I *know* what he did, Hermione. Trust me, the only thing I want to do when I see him is..." Lupin shakes his head, regaining something Hermione does not have at the moment. "There are other reasons that the Ministry must have. Yes, he broke Death Eaters into the school, and yes, he attempted murder. I don't know why that's not worth a prison sentence now, but it will be worth *something* later - do you understand?"

"It doesn't make sense for him--!"

He smiles, like she was a child, and she is offended. "Most things in life don't, Hermione."

Day: 103; Hour: 5

In war movies, depending on the uniforms, she always wonders how they could tell between friend and foe. It is always portrayed as the simplest, most basic thing in a battle, besides perhaps 'duck and shoot'.

However, it is a lie. It is one of the worst lies of all.

She can hardly tell the difference at all. Some she can see their hoods, pointed and telling. Others, she can see the patch of orange on their robe sleeves that let her know *Phoenix*. But the vast majority stands in black and black, in rows and crowds of people she cannot identify. It is the most confusing, frustrating, damning group of billowing black that she has ever seen.

She has shot four people from the Order, including Justin Finch-Fletchley, with Stunning spells. She is only glad that they do not use the Unforgivable Curses. Even if they did, she now could not trust herself to. There are only two Death Eaters that are stunned from her wand, and only one that she had been positive was actually the enemy.

There are figures approaching and fighting around and toward her, and she stands in the middle, helpless and lost. Her hand is shaking just barely, but her shoulders are trembling. Her trainers slip and sink in the mud, and her eyes are useless in the smoke and the dark. There is a shadow coming at her from the corner of her eye, and two more to the right, another in front of her, and she *does not know.*

Friend, foe, friend, foe? Friend or foe… friend or foe… Panic seizes her, and her breath is gasping into her lungs more heavy than air should ever be. She cannot feel her heart, but she can feel the brutal ache from the force with which it pounds. Sweat is running down her neck and back, and making the grip on her wand looser than it should have been. Frantically, her wand flies to the left, the right, and she circles round and round, and thinks to scream. To scream and cry, and then the least brave thing that she has ever thought suddenly slams itself into the forefront of her terrified mind.

She will hide. She will pretend as if she was hit by something, and she'll lie on the ground, and pretend to be dead. Play dead. *Play dead,* that is what she will do. Suddenly, there is nothing in the world she wants more than to bury her face in the mud and not look up or breathe until she can hear no more.

She hates herself for the thought. It makes her sick, and she screams and screams inside her head, because she is not that person. She is not the scared coward in the mud, and this is her war. This is *her* war, and she won't give them the satisfaction.

She is lost, though. Hermione is so completely lost, and her hand is shaking uncontrollably as she swings her wand back to the left. She slides in the mud, almost trips, and it forces her to gasp and vocalize her fear. The figure to the right pushes closer, and she knows she will *Stupefy* them despite not knowing who they are for. Because this is life and death, she knows. Because these are Death Eaters (*possibly, possibly*), and they do not *Stupefy.* They do *not.*

There is a flash of yellow and it misses her hip by just an inch, halting her heart. Her stomach caves in with the air choking out from her tight throat, and she's crying. She's crying without meaning to, or even really noticing, but she is. Because she does not want to die. She is eighteen, and scared, and she does not want to die.

Her throat clicks wetly as she tries to force that hard knot back down into her gut, and she is certain of her actions as she points her wand to the one responsible for that jet of yellow.

"*Stup*--" She is falling then, forward, frozen.

She has seen no color, but there was a burst of pricking warmth at the center of her back. Her bones are locked, muscles stilled, and she topples like a mannequin. The mud is wet and cold and thick, and the irony over being face down in it now is not lost on her. It makes her want to cry harder, could she move the necessary parts to do it. Instead, she watches blackness and tries to breathe, but the mud is thick in her mouth, and blocks the oxygen from her throat and lungs.

Please, please, please, she cries in her head, pushes all her magic and power behind trying to unlock herself.

There are screams and yells, and the sounds of the battle she has heard for an hour now. She feels strangely detached now, though, and thinks she will die here. She will die *here*, in the mud for the Mudblood, and she will never see the sun again. There will only be clouded shadowed figures, fear and heartache, and then this grave of mud and rainwater.

There is a hand, then, as she laments, and the grip is almost painful as it throws her onto her back. She is expecting a mask, or a familiar Slytherin face, keen on mocking or torture. Instead, it is only Neville standing above her, digging mud out of her throat with a trembling hand as he sobs his apologies.

Day: 123; Hour: 11

"Can't you feel it? It's like it's... like it's in the air. I mean, it's happening. Really starting to *happen*." Ron looks up from a corner-tattered copy of some Quidditch magazine he's read a hundred times over, and looks first to Harry.

Because Harry can feel it and he knows this. Because Harry has felt it for years and years, exactly as they feel it now, and there is no one who understands that hollow ache in your gut more than Harry does. There has been a lot of fear now; it surrounds them like a wet, suffocating cloth. They feel as if they've lived with it for the longest time, but not quite like this. The most fear is in the unknowing. In letting one's mind wonder at the possibilities.

But they are brave. They are Gryffindors, and they are friends, and they cannot afford to be afraid now. Especially for Harry's sake, if not the whole world. He is greatness in this room. Larger than life, and yet the smallest boy she has ever seen. His destiny has outweighed his heavy head.

"All it means is that we won't be the only ones trying to fight him now.

Voldemort's stronger now, and now we have more help to defeat him. It's just like it has been though." Hermione tells them, because she knows it's important that Harry thinks it doesn't get even worse than it already has been.

He has lost too much already.

Ron's bright, painful blue eyes meet hers, and they dig down for purchase in her conviction. He knows it is not like it has been, and Harry probably knows this as well. She also knows that Ron is the sort of friend who will tell Harry the full truth of the world as he sees it, and perhaps this is why Harry sees him as the better friend. But Hermione still knows what's best for him anyway. At times, we need to hear the lie to keep living the truth. That is the world.

Ron falls into a moment of understanding that she does not take for granted, because it could pass as easily as the sun behind a cloud. But he understands, and nods, and returns to his magazine while she gropes for a different subject.

"I think we should drink tonight. Ron, when do your parents leave for that meeting they were talking about?" Harry is tinged with mischievousness, and it thrusts back into her face that he is only nineteen, and they are still just children yet.

Ron's eyes dart the room with the excitement of possibilities, as if there were people lurking in the corners, and he stares at Hermione for several seconds. She thinks to say a lot of things, but instead she only smiles and shakes her head, and he grins in the way that used to break her heart.

They would be all right. They were one, two, three and together, and they would be all right.

Day: 131; Hour: 17

"Team A will come in here, B here, C down and up, and D along this route. Do *not* separate from your team! When you are at your destination, alert the other teams by way of the coin as we've done the past two months. When *all teams* are at their designated areas, you attack as a *unit*-- What, Thomas?"

"Well, do we just... just full out charge or--"

"I'm *getting* to that. Pay. Attention."

"Sorry, sir."

Moody isn't in that great of a mood today. He isn't most days. His eye rolls, and he wipes the sweat from his temple, scowling and fierce. He turns back to the complicated map at the front of the room, retracing routes with his wand again. He takes a few seconds to collect himself before explaining the rest of the mission.

Hermione is attentive; despite that she knows it won't be that hard. She has learned to tell such things by who was in the room with her. Despite the presence of a handful of Aurors and senior Order members, it was mostly younger, more inexperienced fighters sitting around the meeting table now.

So when Ron jokes about how twitchy Dean is, or mocks Lavender for trying to see her reflection in the table surface, she pays attention to him and laughs a little too. Because it's nice not to be so swept up sometimes. Because she thinks she might just break and crumble under everything if she doesn't smile at how immature Ron can be, or how quirky her friends were.

However, that night, Luna Lovegood dies across the room from her, and eight more are injured badly. Hermione learns to never judge difficulty level by who is going in. It is war, and people die - in small battles, or big battles, or brushing their teeth in the morning. No one is safe anymore.

She cries herself to sleep for days.

Day: 140; Hour: 4

She walks onto the Malfoy Manor yard, and raises her chin up so high she might begin to float.

She has an appointment with Tonks here today, in one of the many rooms that have been put to use as offices. The rest are used as boardrooms, tactic rooms, and living quarters. A fallout shelter was created in the dungeons, and the entire West wing is used as an infirmary and lab for potions. It serves the Order well.

Tonight, she will go back to the Burrow for her birthday celebrations. Though Tonks offered to reschedule for tomorrow, Hermione insisted on the original date. It is a gift in itself to know that she can now walk on what used to be a Death Eater stronghold.

Every step of her feet on that protected Pureblood-supremacy grass makes her lips form a smirk worthy of a Malfoy.

Day: 144; Hour: 12

Ron and Harry both look up at her with wide eyes, clutching their stomachs and participating in some melodramatics. Hermione sighs and tries to ignore them, even though she knows it's of no use. Knew it was of no use the moment they asked.

"I can't cook that well."

"You can do *everything* well." This is Harry's way of buttering her up.

"Except flying, or not talking or something." This is Ron's way of being Ron.

"What is this for? Food? 'Cause I'm hungry too!" Terry tosses in after an uneventful trip to the pantry.

"I can't be the *only* Muggle-born here--"

"You *are*--" Ron starts.

"Or the only one awake." Harry gives her his innocent smile, even though they both know better.

"And since we're not allowed to use magic here for *some* reason--"

"Because--" she tries.

"Right." Terry nods, though he hasn't known her long enough to be able to cut her off like that, so she glares extra hard at him.

Ron laughs, Harry grins. "I know how to cook a little, but I *burn* things."

She personally thinks Harry is lying through his teeth. "So do I--"

"Please, Hermione! I'm starving! We're *dying*! We only want some *food*." Ron is seconds away from panting and licking the tabletop by the looks of him.

Hermione sighs, glancing at the clock that tells her Tonks won't be at the shelter house for another four hours at least. Which means she could sit and wonder more about where Tonks is supposed to take them after this, or she can make breakfast and get her friends to shut up.

"Fine, but if I burn down the house, we're blaming it on Ron."

"Hey!"

Day: 147; Hour: 16

Her alarm tells her it's half past four in the morning, and some Moody-sent Auror will be at the house to greet her in forty-five minutes. She has winded down the stairs, crossed the kitchen, and put on her coffee before she even *really* notices the three people sitting at the table. It isn't Neville, Lavender, and Justin like she thought, but Malfoy, Parkinson, and the plump man she faintly recalls seeing Lupin shake hands with.

"Miss Granger." He deems her important enough for recognition now.

"Sir," she croaks, nods.

Parkinson looks at her briefly, and Malfoy is busy trying to light the table on fire with his glare. She blinks and thinks, staring at the coffee maker, and tried to make sense of their presence. Perhaps their location had been found out somehow, though it would be impossible without a leak from the inside. She thinks of what she can say to properly convey how she feels about them (*him*) being there, but is coming up empty.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Justin, from somewhere behind her.

She opens her mouth to say something scathing, but only says, "I don't know."

"I'm here to transfer. Are you Blackwood?" the man spoke up.

"I'm Finch-Fletchley. Transferring what?"

"You're not at liberty to know."

"Not at liberty to know? Not at... You bring a Death Eater and his little--" Malfoy's full attention is now directed at Justin, his palm braces against the table, and his body is tight and waiting.

"Justin--" Hermione whispers.

"No. *No*. You bring that *fuck* here, then you're going to tell me I can't know *why*? That Death Eater elitist piece of shit, contaminating my air with his--"

Malfoy shoots up, the table popping and scraping, and Parkinson is up directly after him. "Draco."

She reaches out a hand to calm, but it's batted away with a hard smack. "Perhaps your shortage of brains is the reason Pureblooded elitists think Mudbloods like yourself--"

"*Draco*

"--are useless pieces of scum and dirty flesh. I'm *not* a fucking *Death Eater*

Justin is rushing toward Malfoy now, and Malfoy is yelling to be heard over Justin's inarticulate screaming. The portly man is standing and blocking, screaming back at both of them.

"Touch him and it's *over*, Draco! Touch him and it's fucking *over*!" Parkinson is frantic, hoisting herself up and clambering over the table as Malfoy attempts to get around the bigger man.

"You want to attack me! Come on! Come on, you sick piece of shit! You scum! You fucking... fucking... *dick.* You mother fucker! You Narcissa fucking mother fucker!" Justin is screaming, and on the verge of crying, clawing at the man to try and get to Malfoy.

It is the accumulation of years of withstanding prejudice and Malfoy's sneering face. It is the outcome of a war fought over these same prejudices. It is the breakdown of a man who faces the hooded, masked figures of racism over the bodies of his friends, and remembers Draco Malfoy.

Malfoy, who had been screaming so hard his face and neck were red and his tendons were bulging, is silent. Who had been shoving and squirming and stepping quick on his feet to try and bypass the man he had come with, is now still. His shoulders and chest rise and fall quickly with his labored breaths, and he is calming, while Justin just grows more frantic.

He yells something about a bathroom, and then a desk, and then parchment, then a noisy stair (or perhaps nosy stare). He has reached hysteria, and it is ugly, and powerful, and raw, and Malfoy only stares in the wake of it. Can only stand and watch, and listen to the madness on the other side of the human wall. The color has drained from his face, and he's so still it's painful, and he does not look away from Justin's wet eyes for a second. Parkinson is standing on the tabletop and staring too, and Hermione cannot find the will to tear her eyes away.

"Justin." She says it, and it makes her come to her senses a little more, so she repeats his name again.

He doesn't listen, though she expects as much, and so she goes to him. Her grip is pushed off of him twice, and then he's yelling in her face and shoving at her, but only until he realizes what he's doing. Then, he is on his knees, and his head is bent, and his whole body shakes with the force of his crying. Words are muttered with no sense, wet and desperate like broken prayer.

Hermione follows him down and clutches at him, and her own eyes are tearing up, because she feels the waves of what he feels like something bruising and poignant.

"Get them *out* of here!" she yells. "Get them the hell *out of here. Now!*"

They have no right to see this. They are the reason for it, and they have no right to see him lose it like this over what they did. You don't show your enemy the pain they have caused you; the weakness that they inflect.

"Now!" Hermione screams, and there is movement finally, and it is not long before they are gone from the room.

"I just… I just…" Justin cries, and rocks, and shakes his head.

"I know, Justin. I know," she whispers, smoothed his hair, tries to lend the comfort she does not feel.

Day: 156; Hour: 1

There are twelve people sitting around the table at Malfoy Manor. At first, she thinks the low number is cause from people wandering and exploring the decadence of the Manor (much like she had done her first time here, as much as she tried to disguise her awe). However, it is now seventeen minutes into the laying out of the plan, and no one else has drifted through those heavy doors.

It was a plan that required at least double their current number. It was a dangerous mission even with the extra people. Hermione honestly can't see how they plan on keeping their force down so low.

She raises a hand, more timid than her school days but demanding all the same.

"Granger."

"Sir, is this it?" She waves a hand around the room.

His eyes follow the half-circle of heads in front of him before looking back to her. "It is."

"Sir, I... It just seems a little--"

"We're at a shortage, Granger. We don't have enough *people* for everything we have to do. This mission *can* be completed with twelve people. You'll make it work - do you understand?"

She doesn't. "Yes, sir."

Day: 169; Hour: 10

She heard through word of mouth that Malfoy has taken to fighting now, and it is something she very much does not understand. Though she knows that they have a shortage of people at times, she also has become the sort of person with him that does not want to give him the chance to redeem himself. The price they paid to even have him was too great.

Parkinson, it is said weeks later, has taken to fighting as well. Hermione is both unsure and unsettled with the news, but her life is busy, and she often forgets until she sees them in different places and realizes why they are no longer stationary in the house with empty walls.

Hermione herself does not understand why she pays so much attention to them. At first she thinks it is the same as everyone else; her eyes, ears, and mind are tracking them for the sake of her paranoia. Then, it is something more - a curiosity melded to her personality that she has never been able to shake. She watches them because they are different. She pays attention because the strangeness of their lives is a reprieve from her own. She is simply very *aware* of them, and is unsure if she is *too* aware for it to be normal.

Day: 180; Hour: 11

Twigs snap under their feet, but they are far enough away from any known danger to not be too worried over it. Exhaustion piled on top of hunger can make people have a strange and dangerous carelessness when it came to the world around them. They are focusing completely and single-mindedly on one task - getting to the camp Kingsley and Tonks had set up.

"It's should be just over this hill."

"They wouldn't put it at the bottom of a hill, Ron," Hermione pants out, swinging her bag back off her shoulder to adjust the weight.

"Why not? It's good for blocking."

"It's horrible for blocking! It would give anyone a perfect vantage point to spy on us."

Ron groans. "Well, whatever, Hermione. It's up here soon."

"I hope so," she mutters, because she is tired, worn, and it's easy to be afraid when dark hits.

It is just the two of them now. Harry is being kept safe by keeping him out of the missions until all the Horcruxes are found. A nasty arm injury scared the Ministry bad enough to want to pull him from anything that dangerous anymore. Harry was pretty upset over the whole thing, but settled once they put him on the Horcrux Retrieval Squad.

Hermione knows that Harry still hates being there when his friends are here, trampling through the woods without him. She also knows that Ron hates being here, instead of with Harry. At times, she thinks the only reason Ron is even still with her and not Harry is because they are afraid to leave her alone. Part of this is paranoia, but part of it is truth as well, and she isn't sure if this knowledge bothers her more than being alone would.

They rise over the hill, empty at the bottom. The decline is sharp and steep, and Ron grabs her hand before they descend. She thinks of pulling away, but he is warm and a friend, and she doesn't mind as much as she should.

Day: 193; Hour: 7

She has seen him many times now, in different shelters as she travels. It is the first time she has seen him less than brooding. Really, the first time she has seen him sleeping at all. His head is on Parkinson's shoulder, and there are bandages peeking up from beneath his shirt.

It is hard on him, Lupin has told her. *They all want a piece of him to destroy.*

She can't say she cares all that much, because it is hard on everyone. Because he

has made the choices he made, and he has to accept the consequences of running around and trying to be a Death Eater when he was sixteen. Even if he were only *sixteen* at the time. If Harry had died fighting Voldemort at sixteen, he would have had to accept that damning consequence as well. Malfoy didn't get to get away with anything. He didn't get her pity.

Parkinson smiles, as she is in love with Malfoy, and always has been. Anyone with eyes at Hogwarts would have been able to tell you the same thing. Parkinson would have given her life for Malfoy in the blink of an eye, and would have married him even quicker. Malfoy's affections are a little less known, but only in the way that he likes to shag other girls, but he likes to sleep in the same bed with Parkinson. Or something to that extent. Hermione doesn't pretend to know their relationship, but she tries to guess at it when she has nothing else to do. She does know that in Hogwarts, while Pansy was making big eyes and warm smiles, Malfoy was busy getting blowjobs in the supply closets. Perhaps he was just the cheating, unfeeling boyfriend. Or maybe Pansy was just in love with a man who took what he wanted, and accepted nothing that would grieve him - like love.

She does think that Malfoy took a pain relief potion by the looks of the bottle rolling in Parkinson's hand, and happened to pass out unexpectedly. Hermione doesn't really take him for the type that would allow himself to sleep unprotected in front of people who are his allies, but, yeah, sort of his enemies too. Pansy looks as if she is thoroughly enjoying the peaceful moment, and Hermione lets her.

There will be time later to tell her that she'll be leaving with her in the morning.

Day: 206; Hour: 20

"Ron, my leg is *fine*. Completely healed."

"I didn't say anything about that."

"Oh. You were looking at it strange."

"I was thinking."

"Oh."

"New concept?" Seamus grins.

"What?"

"That he thinks."

"Piss off, Finnigan," Ron bites, and it's a lot angrier than she expects from him over something so small.

She waits until Seamus glares and leaves, and leans forward over the chess game sitting between them. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he snaps, pushes his chair back hard enough for it to knock over, and nearly storms from the room like a two year-old.

"*Ron*!" Hermione stands, and he stops, his back to her.

His head is lowered, and he's rubbing his hands on his pants like he does when he's nervous about something. Her heart counts the seconds, because she knows this is important and that it will not be good.

"I'm leaving."

It takes her a second to remember how to push a voice out. "What?"

"I'm..." He turns back to her, because he was never that weak of a person to not look someone in the face, no matter what he was saying. "I'm going, Hermione. To Harry. I'm going to be with Harry."

She stares, and blinks, and stares more. They haven't even been able to find out Harry's location for months now. Ron hasn't even mentioned *wanting* to leave her. Here. Leave *here.*

"You're... why?" She shakes her head, swallows dry air.

"I don't know. Lupin knows I wouldn't mind... really, and I guess Harry needs someone there, or something." Ron shrugs, a blush on his cheeks, and he's concentrating so hard on being the delicate one for once in his life.

Because Harry wants him. A friend, and it's him, and she'll be the one left behind here. They both will have gone and left her here, alone now.

"Oh."

"Hermione, I..." He steps forward. "I asked if you could come, but they weren't for it. I mean... I... he needs someone. Or else I would stay. But I can't just leave him -

he's alone."

He is. She is. They all are a bit, right at that moment. Trapped in personal space.

"It's fine, Ron."

He knows it's not, or should at least, but he leans his head forward in that cute way of his that means he's buying it. "You sure?"

"Yeah." She shrugs, because she has always been self-sacrificing, and Harry matters more than she does now.

He always has, really. He is the Destined One. The boy who is supposed to save them all. Ron is the best friend. She is the girl who... well, she doesn't really know. She doesn't really have a clue what her title or position is, but she knows she loves them both, and she would rather be alone than let Harry be alone. He needs everything the most. She has always been willing to do her best to give that to him. To give both of them whatever they need.

His clothes are a little cold, and he smells like grease and mint, but it still feels good. He is both hard and soft, and feels odd pressed against her, though she can remember a time, just barely, in the past where it used to be the best thing in the world.

"You need to take a shower," she mutters against his chest, right next to his armpit.

She feels the muscle tense and then he pulls her tighter, until she can barely breathe. "Do I smell?"

He doesn't, at least not like anything bad, and she gives this away when she wraps her arms around his back. "Yes."

"Good. I'll linger after I leave then." He lets her go, because he is touchy but doesn't like to seem too affectionate.

She almost gets sappy and tells him he'll linger always, stench or no, but decides that there is enough sadness in war to not bring in anymore. "When are you leaving?"

"A few hours."

She nods, pulling her gaze up from the carpet. "Okay."

Two

Day: 217; Hour: 18

Hermione has developed a system. It is not the best system, and some might say it is the worst system, but it is hers and it works most the time.

Cast and wait.

She always does her best to look for the insignia or sign to let her know if it is a Death Eater or one of her own that she spots, but when it gets too bad and frantic and she can't tell, she has no choice but to *Stupefy* first and check second. She has learned by now that there isn't time for hesitation in a fight.

Anyone who has noticed her lackluster method hasn't yet said anything to her. The people on the receiving end of it have varying reactions. Some are understanding, but the further up in rank they go, the less likely she's been able to get away without some sort of anger problem directed at her for at least a week.

She brought up the issue at various meetings, and to Moody and Tonks personally. Nothing was done about it however, except for her being asked if she wanted to leave the Order (by a not so tolerant Moody). So, she adapted, as all people must do, to their environment in order to survive.

Cast and wait.

Hermione rolls, and swears she feels a spell hit so close to her that it burns. Thankfully, the Death Eaters play with Avada far less than she had thought they would. They were much more into the torture first.

She rolls to her feet, less agile than she has seen it done by many others, and aims in the general direction of the spell caster. She's disorientated but she manages to hit anyway, and leaves her attacker fallen. It's too clear here, so she runs, looking for cover. The smoke that usually comes with a lot of wand work and destruction is both her enemy and her friend, and she realizes this the most when it is no longer there.

There is a silhouette emerging into the path in front of her, and she gives it just a second before she stuns them. She can never tell which way they are facing when it's like that, and there is no time for hesitation.

She creeps forward, watching for any signs of anyone else. She's horrible at sneaking around though, and her feet seem too loud, and she stops breathing to cover up the noise it makes gasping into her lungs. Halting her breath wasn't a good idea however, as the moment her body kicks it into a desperate need, she's even louder and more ragged than before.

The woman on the ground wears no mask or hood, but her sleeve is void of anything as well. An Auror had been the first to make this mistake, and he was dead now, Hermione knew. They drilled it into their heads after that.

Not all fighting for Voldemort were Death Eaters. Some were just hard supporters who managed to find out about the battle, or just weren't marked yet. There were also a few cases where Death Eaters stripped their identifying hoods off to masquerade themselves as friendly. No one could be trusted without the Phoenix or the orange band around his or her arm.

Hermione isn't sure what alerts her to someone's presence, or if anything did at all but her natural curiosity to check around herself. When she sees him though, she gasps so hard that it stings her lungs, forcing her to cough. It is a booming sound in the stealthy silence around them. It minces her spell to ruins the first time, and when Lucius gets the idea and raises his wand, she manages to finish speaking *Stupefy* before he can finish whatever he was casting.

She watches him fall, disbelieving, and coughs violently into her sleeve, wide eyes still open over her arm and staring. She nearly expects him to rise back up and come blow her all to hell. She is more nerve-wracked now than she has been all battle, and she is completely unsure about what to do with herself. Or with him.

Does she find someone? Does she try to alert the Order, or someone higher up? Does she just kill him off now?

She sends furtive glances around her and rises up from her squat over the other woman. Her heart jackhammers the moment she is fully upright, because he knows she's coming. This is Lucius Malfoy, and he knows she is coming; frozen and waiting for her, just a dozen footsteps away.

Except it's not. She blinks down at him for at least twenty seconds before she herself can move. The anger-twisted face of *Draco* Malfoy greets her from the ground instead, and she honestly should have known better. Lucius was in Azkaban, after all. Draco had also been close enough for her to see the waving orange ends of the tight knotted band had she looked past anything but his hair.

"Crap," she mutters, and touches those same ends just to be double sure that they are there.

She contemplates leaving him like that until someone finds him at the end of the battle, but she knows it will just be a worse situation if she does. She stands and watches his oddly positioned frame for a second more before un-stunning him.

He is quick. Much quicker than she has seen from Harry, or Ron, or anyone off a broom. So quick that she is on the ground before she is completely sure that it was he who does it and not a spell from someone else. He takes a little longer to appear, but it is still faster than she can move to prevent him from doing so.

His knees are heavy and bony, pressing and cutting into the softness of her thighs. He has a hand on her chest, no doubt able to feel the wild thrumming of her heartbeat, and his wand is pressing uncomfortably into the skin beneath her chin. His face hovers over hers, sneering, eyes dark, and she thinks that steel grey is cold at the same time as it is hot. His hair hangs forward, blowing against his face with the wind.

"What. The *fuck*. Are you doing?" he seethes.

"I thought you were someone else," she seethes right back, because he will learn she is not Parkinson or one of *those* girls, and she will *not* take his crap.

The 'someone else' doesn't need to be defined, as understanding lights his features and then darkens them. Hermione bucks against that painful grinding of his kneecaps, and shoves an unmoving shoulder. She digs her own wand into the base of his throat, and it is a battle of eyes and unwavering hate.

"If you can't see the *big, bright, orange* cloth on my arm, Granger, then you do *not* belong in a place like this."

"One could argue that you don't *belong* with it on your arm in the first place," she yells, and it is too loud for the situation, but she is *sick* of Draco Malfoy telling her where she belongs.

"Is that it? Stunned me on purpose, angry that I'm here, and then couldn't go through with whatever unsavory, ill-minded idea you had in mind?"

"Please, Malfoy. You're not even worth the wand work. And if you *were*, it wouldn't be a stunning spell - I'd send you where you sent Dumbledore, because that's the only place you *belong*," she hisses through her teeth, shoving her wand

into the skin of his throat until it could go no more.

His face twists more, and he leans down further, digging everything in, and she knows that what he is about to say will be something horrible. He opens his mouth to speak, eyes lit in anticipation of a delivery that never came.

"Can you tell me why you two are *lying* here in the middle of a *fight*, with your wands on one another?" An orange band flutters, and a vaguely familiar face greets them with anger and distaste.

Malfoy is hauled off of her, but his grip on her shirt brings her up halfway before he notices and drops her painfully back to the ground. He whirls and shoves the man with the grip on the back of his shirt, looking seconds and inches away from all out going at his face.

There is a yell, and the Auror drops, dead. Malfoy spins like the hunted, and it is not a *Stupefy* that she hears, but an *Avada Kedavra* that burns his lips. She stares up at him from the ground, less active but still panting in time with his own heavy breathing.

He licks his lips, lowers his wand, and looks down at her, a murderer. He is haunted, but it is not the shock that comes with the first time, and she knows that even if it is the second, he is far too used to it than he should be. If Harry was right about Malfoy having not been too far gone to kill anyone on the tower, he was wrong about it now.

He turns then, disappearing back into the smoke, and leaves her with two bodies and a head like a carousel.

Day: 238; Hour: 8

Ginny is one of the strongest girls she has ever had the pleasure to know, but she is also young and too hopeful for even Hermione. She has this tougher, sassy exterior that always makes her come off like she is better than she is. But Hermione watches her, and sees her crash over and over again, struggling with the daily dealings of no news from Harry and Ron. She has yet to receive even a letter, and it bothers her far more than she is willing to let anyone know.

She loves Harry. Loves him as she always has. But there is not much room for love in war, and Hermione has begun to learn that as well.

Ginny sleeps with Seamus on a night where he was half-drunk and she was...

Well, Hermione isn't sure what made Ginny do it, but she had. Maybe it had been some sort of revenge thing because she was hurt, or maybe she had just been curious… All the same, she had emerged from a bedroom, rumpled and disheveled, at two in the morning.

She locks herself in her room and cries for three days straight. By the time Fred and George discover what happened, Seamus was three quarters of Britain away. Thankfully, as far as anyone knows, the news remains elusive to Molly, Arthur, and the rest of her older brothers.

She is standing in Hermione's doorway now, hair glittering orange and deep red in the shadows and moonlight. It is the time between the third night and the fourth morning, and only the fifth day since Hermione has been back. She is scheduled to leave again at the end of the day to the Malfoy Manor, and only God (or Moody) knows after that.

Her motions are practiced and mechanical, but it is a defeated slump with which she collapses under the blankets. Hermione usually turns her back to people sharing the bed with her, because she has a thing about people breathing in her face - she hates it. This is an exception however, and she throws her arm around the bony pair of shoulders across from her.

Ginny's skin is cold, like she had just come from the outside, and Hermione can hardly feel any life in the set of her bones. She rubs her shoulder blades in the little pinches she knows Ginny likes, and scoots closer so they share the same pillow.

"He doesn't have to know." She begins to cry then, throwing Hermione into a hug.

Hermione wraps her arms about the other girl's head, and twirls long strands of red around her fingers. She lets Ginny cry, and cry, and cry, and she stares at the black wall that is really blue with the lights on.

"He'll find out," Ginny whispers, positive in her statement.

"He'll understand." Eventually. "It's okay."

Ginny shakes her head against Hermione's shoulder. "No, it's not."

"It will be." And she is silent after that.

Day: 239; Hour 12

Molly and Arthur do their best to make all of them forget any other problems, and focus on the fact that it is Christmas. It is slow in the beginning, as the absence of Harry and Ron isn't easily forgotten, and Ginny is obvious in her depression and regret. It picks up though, when Hermione learns to forget the differences in past Holidays, and just focus on the positive things about this one.

She is happy she is here with all of them.

Day: 245; Hour: 19

Hermione smiles at Hannah, Cho, and Justin, the only ones in the house for the New Year celebration. Her cheeks are warm and red with wine, and she hopes this year will bring change.

Day: 256; Hour: 10

There is smoke, and smoke, and blood. Blood all over everything. It's on her hands, and clothes, and she can feel it caked and layered on her face. It makes her want to throw up, and so she does, all over her new shoes. She spits and spits to try and get rid of the long strands of saliva and the horrible taste in her mouth, but it doesn't work.

She breathes deep, her throat burning and raw, and her breath catches in her chest. Her feet numb and dumb, trip over themselves, and the ground, then a body. It is warm, and crunches and squishes against her foot at the same time. He is dead, beneath his mask and blood spattered face, but she still scrambles back from him anyway. She spits the puke from her mouth, closing her eyes as she heaves again, and sees his lifeless brown eyes staring back up at her. It reminds her of her Uncle Henry and the dead deer he kept hanging from the walls of his garage, with their wide and petrified glassy eyeballs staring her down.

Her fingers curl in grass and dirt, and she's crawling. Crawling until she manages to get enough momentum up to pull her feet to the ground, and then she is running. Running, and running, through smoke and the smell of sulfur and dark magic. There is a cracking in her chest and throat as she strangles air in through all the phlegm and bile, and her heart is like a dead weight in the hole made for it.

"Jesus, help me. I just... home. Need... God." She's starting to edge to hysteria and she knows it, because her tears have made her blind, and she's running without paying attention.

Through the grey, she sees a movement, trivial at first, and then the outline of a

hood against the smoke. They are collapsed to the ground as she lowers her wand, and she keeps running. Wounds crisscross her skin, and her shirt is soaked with her own blood. It's running from her head in gushes that don't seem to end, and she twirls and twirls in a dizzy sort of dream.

"Help!" She tries, screams, because she can't find the medical help she needs by eyesight alone. "Help!"

And it is not for her, but a man she does not know, with the Phoenix orange and red on his sleeve. A man who is dying and gurgling blood bubbles, and who didn't want her to let go of his hand.

"Help me! Help me, please! Shit! Shit." She breathes, harsh, spins. "Damn it. Damn. Damn."

Her breath is rush, rush, rushing and now she's hyperventilating. Gasping in air, and reaching out to clutch something, but there is nothing there.

"A man! He's... a man..." Her eyes drift, and she peels them open, but they drift again. "Help."

The world tips, spinning up and to the right, and then any air she had left, leaves her in a *whoosh*, without a fight. She is met with blackness before she can even breathe again.

Parkinson. Pansy Parkinson now, is in her face as she opens her eyes from that dark. It had seemed to last forever and ever, and if she thinks hard, she can see flashes in between of things she does not know if she dreamt or truly saw. The point is that she had fallen to unconsciousness, and now Parkinson is above her, drowning her.

Yes, drowning her. There is water all around her, covering her, choking her as she breathed. Hermione gasped and choked, and lost all connection to oxygen. She grabs Parkinson's hands on her shoulders and cuts into them, or tries, but her fingernails are blunt and she can't break skin. She tugs instead, and yanks, and presses her fingers like a vice into the frail structure of bones that make up Parkinson's wrists.

Hermione catches a breath, gasps and coughs. Coughs long and hard, and it burns her throat like fire. She is winning now, or something close enough as she can breathe a little more. Panic is still tough and terrible, but it is nothing to the look of fright on that face hovering over hers.

Hermione drops a hand away to go for that face, but then Parkinson has pulled a hand back as well. It slaps Hermione across the face, again, and then again, and then so hard that it bashes the other cheek off the side of the tub.

Tub.

Hermione blinks slowly at the chipped yellow. Water rushes in a wave between her face and the porcelain, and it is tinged red with blood. Her blood. Pansy Parkinson's pure hands buried in all that muddy water.

She breathes, slow, and pulls her head up a little. It is heavy, and she feels as if every bit of her has drained and rushed away with that wave. The water sloshes, and she looks back to Parkinson, shell-shocked.

"It's alright, Granger," she whispers, and Hermione realizes that they are crying.

There is a tightness in her chest that soars up into her throat, and it cracks and explodes as she breathes out, and she sobs. Pitiful, broken sounds that echo off the tiles, and lets her head fall back on the tub again. Her eyes focus on the water stained ceiling, and her fingers are stiff as they curl into the heavy fabric of her jeans.

"Oh, God." She remembers the man, and falling, and does not know if this was real or if she has lost her mind fully to war.

"It's okay."

It is not.

"Where am I? Where..."

"You're at the shelter house on Pine Grove. They brought you here after... I suppose you were in a fight. There's others out there too, and that woman... Tonks. Tonks is coming back soon."

"I don't remember," Hermione breathes, raises those foreign-feeling hands to her face and shakes her head. "I don't remember."

"You were in shock, Granger. You were... all over the house, and hitting the walls, and yelling..." There is a mutter, a distant sound of speech. "I had to snap you out of it before you injured yourself even more."

"Why..." Hermione shook her head, because she could not grasp how Parkinson, Pureblooded elitist, could begin to care. "Thank you."

Thank you, because it doesn't matter how. Only that she did. That she did, and she had helped, and she deserves Hermione's appreciation because of it.

Hermione tries to pull herself up, but Parkinson is forced to help. It feels as if she's lost most control over her basic motor functions. There is pain. In her head, and back, and arms, and everywhere. *Everywhere.*

Then she forgets the hurt of it all as her eyes fall over Parkinson's shoulder and to the doorway. It takes her a few seconds of sporadic thought and placement before she really gets that Malfoy is standing there. He leans against the frame with all the nonchalance in the world, his stance relaxed and his face blank. He sneers when she looks at him though, and gives her an assessing glare before turning his eyes back to Parkinson.

"I don't even know why you bothered. The fact that Granger has gone mad isn't your problem."

Parkinson brushes her hair behind her ear and climbs out of the tub, ignoring him all together. He straightens up, tense and annoyed now, and simply watches as the two fumble to get Hermione out of the tub.

Hermione is embarrassed and blushing like mad that she needs help at all, that she is in this circumstance, and that Malfoy of all people has to see it.

"You're never going to learn, Pansy."

"Fuck *off,*" she snaps.

"Fuck off?" He holds a rage laced through those words that makes even Hermione's skin raise in bumps along her shoulders.

Parkinson stops and licks her lips, glancing up at Malfoy. He nods slowly, looking rather sinister, and moves from the doorway in all sharp movements and hard angles. Hermione almost cares what that was all about, but not enough, and Parkinson is helping her steady herself before she can even bother trying.

Day: 274; Hour: 22

There is a letter from Harry that she keeps folded and buried in her back pocket.

She carries it with her everywhere. When she showers, it is transferred from one dirty pocket and into the clean one. At times, she can feel its presence like heat. Often times, she has to reach to make sure it is there.

Neville waits patiently for her to take her turn as she shoves a hand down to feel the sharp edges. Just to be sure. Pansy and Angelina are yelling at one another in the other room, in a fight that had started over a bag of chips and escalated into something to do with Angelina's ex-boyfriend. Neville is completely put out by the presence of Pansy and Malfoy, and informs her it is only the second time he has had to deal with them in one of the shelters. Hermione has lost count of how many nights she slept in the same house with them, though she has no idea as to why that is.

They generally avoided one another anyway. Besides a handful of fights with Malfoy about breakfast and the theory of Darwin, and a few rather civil words exchanged between Pansy and she, they basically kept to themselves. Pansy and Malfoy, that was. Hermione usually roamed the house in proof that she wouldn't hole herself up in response to their presence, and the two of them mostly kept to the rooms (or room) they were in. It was usually a surprise to turn the corner and see them.

Unless, of course, she was with other friends. Her own ex-Housemates tended to be the worst. Seamus and Dean specifically. Malfoy was a huge, neon target for most the guys dealing with some pent up aggression. Malfoy didn't even seem to mind, and there had been quite a few duels and fistfights Pansy and she had taken to breaking up.

There is a crash from the living room, and Neville's head snaps up to share a look with her. They are up, on their feet, and out into the other room in a matter of seconds.

"Go ahead! Go ahead, bitch! Hit me! I'll have your ass in Azkaban so fast, your head will spin! They're just waiting! One little thing, and you're done! You Death Eater slag! You--"

"I'll *kill you*

"What? What? Was that a *threat*? I feel like my life is in danger now! I'll have to Floo Moody, and let him know that you are unstable and cause an unsafe environment--"

"Oh, you can't *fight me*? I thought you were a *Gryffindor,* bitch! You pussy! You coward! Scared? Huh?" Pansy screams, throwing herself forward and trying to pry the arm around her waist off.

It is no use, as Malfoy is not removing his grip from her. Instead, he walks backward, dragging her struggling form against him to take along. He walks slow, letting them get their words in, and watches Angelina with a smirk. He looks at her like one might upon a frog backed into a corner by a three year-old, but without the pity.

"Coward! You--" Pansy starts, and Angelina yells and rushes forward, but a nameless man grabs her arm.

Malfoy squats and hauls Pansy up against his frame. She bucks and yells, and elbows back against him, but he only wraps his other arm around her and speeds up his retreat to the bedroom.

"So," Hermione turns back to Neville at the sound of the door being kicked shut and Pansy's furious yell, "my turn, right?"

Day: 291; Hour: 17

Seamus feels her thigh in a way that makes her stomach flip in the exact sort of way a man should never aim to make a woman feel. She thinks of Ron, the last to have ever tried it, and of Ginny, who still looked stricken at the mere mention of the Irish.

The air is fresh and light outside, and she sits alone until the sun rises, thinking about friends and sex and how often the two seem to meet now.

Day: 304; Hour: 18

Hermione knows she should have sent the birthday well wishes three months ago if she wanted them to reach Ron on time, but she has good excuses for not planning this as well as she usually does.

Day: 306; Hour: 7

When Hermione walks into the house, she is sure the last thing she expects Malfoy's reaction to be is one of anger. Directed at her for walking wrong or something, sure, but not Parkinson.

Still battle-weary and tired, Parkinson only squeals in protest and surprise as Malfoy grabs her arm and sends her flying into a different room. Hermione stills in her own surprise, but he spares her no glance as he charges into the bedroom and slams the door shut behind him.

Hermione isn't sure if she should rush in to defend the girl who had helped her that night in the tub, and several times over the past few days as well, or if she should just sit and wait. She chooses the latter, because Malfoy/Parkinson business isn't hers.

She is still worried though, and so she stays in the hall in case she might need to rush in. Malfoy only raises his voice once, muffled and deep, and it is Pansy who screams the most. Hermione knows Malfoy though, and in her head, she can hear and feel that velvet flow of hard words. When Malfoy is at his angriest, he speaks in the lowest tone. It's a dangerous sound - one a person is forced to pay attention to, and he probably knows it.

Malfoy flings open the door, the knob breaking through the wall and plaster as it is slammed. He doesn't bother to shut it, and his body is tight and thrumming with rage as he paces a narrow line down the hall and out of sight. A moment later, a door slams, and in the stillness, she can make out Parkinson's crying.

It takes her a few seconds of pushing herself before she peeks inside the room. Pansy is uninjured, sitting on the bed with her hands clasped in her lap.

"Are you okay?"

"Fuck off."

And had it been Ginny, or even Lavender, she would have entered anyway. This was Parkinson though, and so after a slight hesitation, Hermione turns for a bathroom and a hot shower.

Day: 324; Hour: 1

Hermione lies and stares at her ceiling, though she is eavesdropping more than she is thinking. The walls are thin, and she can hear Dean and Malfoy screaming at one another down the hall. Hermione had been wondering how long it would take for Malfoy to snap, and he has now.

Malfoy had been yelling about that night on the tower, and choices, and Hermione kept thinking of how Lavender put it in the same perspective for

Hermione three weeks ago. At the time she had thought that Lavender was just trying to rationalize why she wanted to sleep with Malfoy, but perhaps she had just had a different insight.

Do you blame a child for doing what his father said, when that child should have been old enough to make his own choices? Yet, if that person has only been exposed to one sort of right their whole lives, do you still blame them for having a biased opinion because they were never shown how to see from a different perspective? And do you still blame that boy, despite everything he faced, that in the end, he never went through with it? Even when he supposedly is now doing what he can to rectify his mistake in the first place?

Perhaps you do anyway. Because a man was still dead because of his actions, wasn't he? And perhaps that is the reason Dean threw a fist into the aristocratic structure of Malfoy's jaw. And perhaps that was why Hermione remained in her bed instead of doing a single thing about it.

Day: 360; Hour: 11

She literally trips over Malfoy, the sun blinding her eyes and exhaustion making her feet stupid. He is sun baked, reeking of sweat and blood in a way that tells her he has been lying there for a very long time. Blood tracks from the corner of his mouth, down the sides of his face, and stains the white of his hair. His teeth are pink and lined red, and when he looks up at her, she isn't sure he sees her at all.

There is a man, his black hood crooked on his head, lying just inches from Malfoy, dead. Malfoy's body shakes with the long aftershocks of *Crucio*, and it has seemed to paralyze him for who knows how long.

"Malfoy? Malfoy, can you hear me? Follow my finger." His eyebrows draw down, and he gurgles as if he is trying to speak, but only more blood rushes up from his mouth.

She rolls him to his side, blood as red as hers rolling onto the dirt ground and pooling in an oval. His shirt is scorching against her hands, despite how heated they already are. She lifts an arm and tries to wipe the sweat from her face, feeling the rub of burnt skin against the fabric.

But it is nothing compared to Malfoy. He is beet red and soaked to the bone.

She rolls him back over and he is breathing through his mouth now, his stomach caving and rising in short pants. "Okay, good. Very good, Malfoy. Now, I'm just…I

don't know..."

She shakes her head, because she only knows basic healing spells, and nothing that could really help him. There is a pain relief potion in her pocket, and she pulls it out, popping off the top with her thumb.

"Alright, I'm going to pour..." His mouth shuts, and she goes about opening it again. "I'm just going to pour this in... it's going to *help* you, Malfoy. It's just to take the pain away, okay? I promise. Just..."

He refuses to open his mouth, and she is forced to pry it open with a lot of pulling, clutching, and digging. The bright green liquid fills up his mouth before he can get it closed again. Hermione waits, but he does not swallow. He takes slow, measured breaths through his nostrils, the green sloshing inside his mouth.

"*Malfoy*!" She wipes the sweat from her face again, in her eyes and burning now, and looks around them. "Just swallow! If it does anything but *help*, you can kill me, alright? Okay? I give you permission!"

He blinks, his eyes on hers now, fully focused. It makes her feel as if he would like to kill her regardless. He still doesn't swallow.

"Just..." She paused. "Can you swallow? Are your throat muscles locked too? Is... Jesus."

She wraps an arm around his head and pulls him up a few inches, her free hand smoothing over his throat like something she had seen Lupin do once. She is shaking with fatigue and with lack of knowing, and it doesn't even matter that much, because it is just pain relief. It isn't going to save his life or anything. And she already knows how angry he is over it, and how much he is ridiculing her in his head, and it makes her blush under all the heat already in her cheeks.

"Okay. Okay," she whispers and lowers him back down, and her hand is shaking when she cups his chin and turns his head.

The liquid splashes over to join his blood, and his eyes are different now when she turns his head back. He looks at her like she is a little insane, maybe, and also in a way that she does not understand. Perhaps she has seen the look a thousand times, but never on *his* face, and that makes all the difference.

"Okay. Okay. Okay," she repeats, looking around them again.

The Order puts up Anti-Apparition wards around any place they attack, which is usually detrimental for any fleeing Death Eaters. All Aurors and members of the Order carried emergency Portkeys just in case they had to flee as well. Hermione pulls hers from her pocket, a lighter wrapped in a scarf, and presses it into Malfoy's hand. She curls his fingers around the weight, holding them tightly, and then pulls the scarf from between a crack in his fingers. Belatedly, she remembers that he carries one as well and that she should have used his, but it is far too late.

His eyes are wide now, surprised maybe, and she presses the scarf with her name at the bottom onto his chest and pulls back before he disappeared. Just in case there is a mass emergency, and they might need to know that she has no Portkey.

She stares at his blood on the ground, at the spot where he had been, and then the red sticky pureness all over her fingertips. After a second more, she forces herself back, and grips her wand, moving on.

Day: 365; Hour: 2

Parkinson sits on the bottom stair of the porch, the very one that Lee Jordan guided her over earlier yesterday morning because it was unsteady with the weak wood. Hermione is unsure if she is waiting for Malfoy or nothing at all, but the door still creaks when she opens it, and Parkinson responds as if she had been waiting for *her* all this time - no movement at all.

"It's different, isn't it?" And Hermione meant the war, or the dark, or the quiet of the night, but Parkinson reaches up to touch the bob of her hair.

"You noticed?"

She sees it then, the shorter length, and thinks perhaps Parkinson isn't the sort of person to talk about much of anything else. "Yes. It's nice."

She doesn't respond, and Hermione feels awkward at first, and then just lost in her own thoughts over the one year milestone they have reached now.

Day: 397; Hour: 5

Ron doesn't write her for three weeks, and she doesn't receive it for another two. It is a piece of something she feels as if she has been missing for a very long time, because it has been four weeks since she has seen a single face she can recognize.

It is neat in some places, and so sloppy she cannot make out words in others, but

she reads and studies it until it makes sense, before shoving it into her pocket beside the ones from Harry.

Day: 400; Hour: 23

"I should have known I would see you around with your nose up in the air, Granger. How does the air smell from your self-created pedestal?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione isn't sure how having her head currently shoved inside the fridge was somehow Malfoy-equivalent to her nose being in the air.

"Did your friends praise you? Hermione Granger, the sweet little Muggle-born saving the big, bad, son of a Death Eater. The schoolyard bully. The nasty ferret. How caring and giving she is."

She blinks twice at the strange sauce substance in a jar, and pulls back to look at him over the door. "I haven't even said a word about it--"

"You haven't *had* to. The way you've been walking around all day with that broom shoved up your arse and bending your spine straight says all you *have* to about it. Think you're one up on me, do you? Think you're some sort of *better person*

Hermione wrinkles her nose at the odd slur to his voice, and the leer on his face. "Malfoy, are you *drunk*?"

"Fuck, Granger. I must look completely evil in your eyes. *Drunkenness*. Does this break one of those cardinal rules of your God? Are you deeply offended by my sway and bloodshot eyes? Are you *shitting* yourself in indignation, Granger?"

He smells of sex and liquor. It assaults her senses the moment he is close enough for his scent to kick in. He is rumpled, his hair messy and a red love bite, fresh, on his neck. His eyes are dull though, and there are smudges of purple under the grey.

"I don't *care* what you do, as long as it doesn't hurt me or my friends, Malfoy. Furthermore, I didn't say or *act* in any way that was smug…or…or meant to rub in your face the fact that I Portkeyed you out over a friggen month ago. It wasn't that big of a deal. And if it *was* a big enough deal for you to be bringing up, it only proves what kind of person you are that you're *angry* about it, instead of just *thanking* me."

He seems to only have understood one part of this. "*Thanking* you? Oh, yes,

Granger. That is what I should do, isn't it? What would be *proper* of a fellow member of light, right? *Thank* you for bruising my ribs with your shoe when you fell over me. *Thank you* for nearly drowning me to death. Thank *you* for Portkeying me to an empty bloody house where I stayed, alone, for four hours! You're marvelous under pressure. I'm sure you know this already from your random *Stupefys* you like casting at passing shadows."

She is blushing fiercely, embarrassed because this is the truth and they both know it. "I should have just left you there baking in the sun then. My *apologies,* Malfoy."

She shuts the fridge door as hard as she can, though it is not hard enough, and only makes a soft sound as it closes. She is glaring at him, but he is smirking in a devious way that is almost frightening enough in the dark of the kitchen to scare her. Her wand is on the counter, next to her burnt bagels, and a good five steps behind his rapidly approaching back.

"You *should* have. Yes, Granger. Yes, you should have *left* me there. The one who let the Death Eaters in, right? The bad, bad Slytherin who--"

His tone of voice makes her hairs rise all down her arms. "Are you *mad?* Yo--"

"Completely. I'm fucking insane. *Insane*." He is seriously beginning to scare her now. "Why do I deserve to be left?"

"What?"

He darts forward then, grabbing her arms, and she is reminded of just how quick he can be. He throws her up against the wall, pinning her with the force of his bodyweight slamming into her. The tip of her toes brush the linoleum, but the rest of her is suspended. Even her breath, as she stares at his face in front of hers, and waits for the fallout.

His eyes are wild, wide, alert. They dart and track the minuscule movements of her face, and his breath reeks when it hits her nose. His fingers tighten, and later she will bruise, but she doesn't think of this yet.

"Why do *I* deserve to be *left?*"

"Malfoy. Put. Me. Down."

"Answer the question, Mudblood--"

She rushes her knee up and it only meets his thigh, and it manages to anger him more than hurt him. He pulls them back, slams her forward again, pulls back, forward again. Pain shoots from the small of her back to the bottom of her skull, and she almost cries out. She punches him instead, and digs her nails in, and pinches, and kicks at him some more. He tears his hands from her upper arms to find her wrists, and his hips jerk forward to slam her against the wall when she starts to slip down in her struggle. She growls, pulling her arms from his attempts to grab them, and clobbers him over the head and to the face. He is slowed with the droll of inebriation and the way she is coming at him from all angles, but there are chords and bricks of muscle in him where she is softer, and there isn't much of a chance before he has her pinned again.

"Don't call me that! Don't you *ever* say that word again!"

"Answer the question! Answer the question!" He yells this, his words so rushed that they form a stream of sounds she can't distinguish at first.

"*You are*

"Why do I get left? Huh? Why do I get left!" He slams her back again.

"Because you're you! Because you-- Because you're a racist. Because you're a boy who can stand here and fight for my side, but still call me that *fucking name*! Because you're throwing me into a wall! Because you're Draco Malfoy, and you. Are. An. *Asshole*. Because you don't *deserve* to be *saved*!"

"Then why did you!" he screams, frustrated and at the end of a short rope, as if this has been the question all along.

Hermione doesn't know how to respond, and he bares his teeth and shakes her. She stops all her pushing and squirming and kicks, and looks back in the face of his confusion, drunkenness and rage.

"Because I'm Hermione Granger," she whispers.

Because she is the girl who has faith in humanity even when it has none in her. Because she is the stupidest smart person you'll ever meet. Because there always has to be the person who believed too much in nothing at all.

"Draco!" His name was a whispered gasp, laced with shock and disapproval.

He looks disgusted by her answer, and all the hardness of his body steps back. His fingers clench, making her face tighten in pain, and then he lets go and drops her. Her bare feet smack the floor, and Pansy is there, pushing between them and against him. She sways and staggers, and he is holding her up more than she is getting him away.

"What are you doing? What are you doing?" she whispers, stumbling over her words.

He stares and stares at her over Pansy's useless struggle, though he begins a slow, backwards trek to the doorway in acceptance of her attempt. He doesn't break eye contact, and it is the most captivating hold a person has ever had on her. Her heart hammers and her body aches, but she cannot look away from Malfoy and the clear grey that tells her lies about how drunk and sane he is.

He raises a finger, long and pale, and shoves it into the air. "Don't ever do it again. Don't *ever* fucking do it again."

Then he turns, Pansy stumbling against his back, and makes for his bedroom.

Day: 410; Hour: 19

Harry has messy handwriting, and it is even worse when he is in a rush. Judging by the sloppy scrawl in front of her, it looks as if he had been too busy to even write. Which makes her appreciate that he had even more. Though, it is Harry, and his busy could be battling Voldemort and a slew of Death Eaters, or an intense game of chess with Ron. All the same, she is happy for the letter.

He tells her nothing of his location, or details of what he is doing, but he tells her there is progress - and there is hope in that. He misses her, and it feels good to be missed, and Ron is doing well too. They are kept up-to-date on how everyone is doing, and they don't understand why Arthur and Molly have allowed Ginny to join the real fighting. Ron has injured his finger somehow, and they are getting closer to coming home. She reads and reads over again this letter at least thirty times before letting it join the others in her back pocket. She would surely have read it thirty more times had Lavender not walked in the room to declare temporary roommate status. The last thing Hermione needs is for Ginny to find out she has received another letter, and another opportunity has passed where Ginny could have received one at all.

"It's good that I don't know him that well. Passion dies the more you know a person. Proven. Fact." Lavender smiles at a girl Hermione does not know, but thinks

is too young to hear about Lavender's sex life or fight in a war at all.

Lavender shags a strange looking man with a thick beard and bright green eyes, who is at least ten years older than her, but who she finds undeniably attractive. It is a pattern Hermione has begun to see emerge, and perhaps people were having sex all over at Hogwarts too, but she does not remember seeing it so blatantly obvious. At times, she feels as if she is the only one *not* having sex with a stranger or friend - because it *is* usually a stranger or friend, as there seems to be room for sex in war, but not relationships. They excuse it as if it does not matter because it is a desperate time, but Hermione thinks it does still matter.

Fighting and death and fear are not excuses to become whores and shag every winking bloke or bird that comes your way. But that is the way she is wired, and Hermione faintly recalls the number of times she has thought the same as her peers.

Lavender and the girl continue giggling and talking about positions and techniques, and Hermione lies in bed and watches the shadows the clouds create over the moon. She thinks of how alone she has felt for months now, but without the ability to actually *be* alone. She thinks of Harry and Ron, and how happy or sad they might be now. She thinks of her parents, and friends, and death, and hoods moving in black towers against gloomy skies and white smoke.

Sometimes, she thinks of her blood. She closes her eyes and feels it pounding and pulsing, and rushing against her skin and through her veins. At times, the feel of it makes the hollow of her throat cave and croak, and she wants to cry. Other times, she concentrates really hard on feeling important, and confident, and to have faith in who she is. And at times, like now, she is not sure how to feel at all.

She plays with the bottom of her dad's big T-shirt that she's worn to bed since she was nine, and she sings old songs in her head until she falls asleep.

Day: 412; Hour: 4

It is not like she thought it would be; war. Back at Hogwarts there would be a problem, time to find the solution, and then a way to solve it. There had been fear and danger, but it had been very different. At the time, she had thought it was a very dangerous thing, her life and her friendship with Harry. She understands now that she did not have a broad enough range of experience to fully measure that danger.

War is sloppy. It is bloody, and hard, and wrong, and all the things that are normally associated with it. But it is sloppy, Hermione persists in her head, because

she has never heard anyone else say it before. There is hardly any time, and what time they do find is never put to too much good use. Then there are long, long lags where absolutely nothing happens at all, but people letting off steam and trying to forget that they are waiting, and what for. But they still need more time, more people, and more research, because she knows already that a war cannot be won just by heroes and those with hearts.

Three

Day: 416; Hour: 12

"You know what I think about? While I have sex?"

"Oh, Merlin." Ernie groans.

"I don't think we even want to know." Lavender laughs.

"This night just got scary, is what I think." Dean flips a card on the table between him and Ernie, and grins over his shoulder at Roger Davies.

Roger gives him a glare. "No, no... Listen. How many people in the world, do you think, are having sex right now? You know? No! No... Look. When I'm having sex, I can't help but think... *how* many people in the world are currently doing the same exact thing, and feeling the same exact way? It's like an orgy. Like a mind--"

"I've never been in an orgy, but I can guarantee it's not like--"

"Sure, sure, Lav." Ginny laughs and the rest follow, despite the affronted look on Lavender's face.

"So, it's like a *cheap* orgy," Roger tried. "It just makes it *better.* Sex is *always* better with more people."

The room laughs or bursts into agreement, and Hermione blushes and shakes her head at her knees.

Day: 422; Hour: 6

She vomits.

There isn't much to give up, but her body heaves and pushes until all that's left of the liquids and soup she's had in the past three days is on the ground. Her snot is running all down her face, and she sucks it back up, hacks it out. The feel of it along her tongue sends her gagging, and it's green bile that splashes down across her hands.

"God," she whispers pathetically.

She does not have the stomach for war, or blood, or death. She is not made for it.

She does not know his name, and she feels horrible about it now. She isn't sure why she does, but she does. His name is important, and his life was too, and this was a human being with a family. He is dead now. Dead, dead, dead, and he deserves to have her remember his name of all things.

She runs a spell, checking for a pulse, but he is pale blue. "Okay. Alright."

She wipes her hand, puke and saliva, on her jeans, and reaches up to shut his eyes. She mutters a prayer to a God he probably doesn't believe in, and flicks the blood-caked hair away from his swollen face. She moves on, because there is time to count the dead later (maybe), and absolutely no time for it now.

The figure she has just Stupefied is now back up, but she has caught on by now, and throws another one at him. It will wear off in five seconds, she knows, and so she is quick to bind him with another spell, wrapping him in rope. He moves and she stuns him again, advancing to try and find his wand. Her hands shake from the *Crucio* she took (twice) before realizing that they were somehow throwing off her stunning spells.

She has to stun him seven more times, all close calls to him attacking her physically, before she is able to find his wand. She runs backwards, breaking the thick length of wood and tossing it to the ground. He is back in motion against the confines of the rope, and then struggling to his feet with a roar when he finds his wand gone. Hermione is at a loss on how to handle the situation, her eyes darting the area for a way to keep him away from her without having to stun him every few seconds or-- She raises her wand and casts a Dancing charm at him, trying to force her mind to remember something useful. She cries out in frustration because it feels as if her mind has broken down on her, and failed her at a pivotal moment. All that knowledge, now suddenly blanked.

She whacks the heel of her palm against her temple and clenches her teeth, groaning and impatient as she tries to think of something useful. The Death Eater currently dancing a jig several paces away yells out then, and she looks up in time to see a flash of green strike him between the eyes.

Whirling, her heart pops up into her throat, and it is Malfoy behind her. "What the fuck are you doing! You expect to have the whole lot of them *dancing* their way across the bloody yard? This isn't a theatre production, or for your bloody *entertainment*

"Shut up! Just shut *up!* They... they can't be stunned! I have... I've no idea *why*. I'm not--"

"Then *kill* them--"

"What?"

"Kill them, Granger!"

"I can't do that!" She knows she looks horrified, but she is, and so it is fitting no matter what he thinks of it.

He steps forward, waving a dirt covered hand in a wide circle. "Why? What the hell do you think happens, Granger? Maybe twenty percent of them are questioned and put in Azkaban - the rest? Dead. Dead, Granger. Shorten the fucking process and *kill them*!"

"I can't!"

"So you're going to have them pulling fucking ballerina moves--" he pauses, clenching his jaw and his fists and shakes his head. "Here. Here."

He moves forward quickly, grabbing the front of the shirt of the man that she had been sorry to not know the name of. "Hey!"

"Who killed him?"

"Wh-- That doesn't matter!"

"It *does* matter, you dipshit! You dumb fucking do-gooder bitch! Do you see this? Do you *see* it? His guts are hanging out his bloody stomach, Granger, but you've got the guy who did it doing a fucking *waltz*." He seethes, drops the man down with more care than she expected, and starts toward her.

"I am not that kind of person! I--"

"Do you know that eighty-three percent of Stupefied Death Eaters are un-stunned by their allies, and walk from the battle perfectly fine? Did you know that? Almost *all* of them, Granger. This means, that eight out of the ten Death Eaters that *you* stun, end up going off and killing one of your friends. Do you like that? Hmm? Are you the *kind of person* who is going to let that happen?"

Hermione spots a shadow over his head, and when she raises her wand, he visibly flinches. His is raising in counter, but she has already shot, Stupefying the figure. He pauses, his wand still raised and pointing at her heart, before whirling.

"Was that a *Stupefy*, Granger? Was... Do you not get this! Do you not fucking get it!" They aren't questions, just a scream that have chords rising up from his neck. "Those are lives! Those are your precious Gryffindor chums hanging in the balance! Whose life is more important, Granger? Whose side are you on?"

"Screw you! You don't *know*

"I don't *care* if your heart is so fucking big it doesn't fit in your chest cavity, alright? I don't *care* if you want to save the world one bunny and house-elf at a time! If you want to save *lives* then you'll *take them*! Sacrifice some sleep like the rest of us Granger, and--"

A jet of green shoots from his wand and hits the crumpled cloak on the ground. Hermione screams and runs forward, bile making a reappearance and burning the already raw tissue of her throat.

"No! You... I... I don't..." Hermione is shaking by the time she reaches the dead, and it is with more relief than she can imagine that she drops and cries over the body of some nameless Death Eater.

"Blaise always said you would lose your mind, but *fuck* Granger." He sounds as if he is in disbelief.

"Shut... shut up." She sucks it up, and tries to regain some sense of normalcy, because she is acting mad and she knows it. "I... I didn't know..."

He is silent, but only for four seconds, because he can be just as quick mentally as he is physically. "What side she was sporting on her arm, you mean? Merlin. Merlin, shit, you are so *incompetent*! You lack *everything* a person should have to even be here! Do everyone a favor and either go home or get hit by something! It woul--"

"Leave me alone! I..." She growls and clenches the enemies robe in her anger. "I fucking *hate* you! I hate you! I *hate* you so *much* that I can *explode*!"

"Have at it then." It is her anger that works to calm him, and his drawl is bored.

Her hand falls on a rock, smooth and palm-sized, and she whips it at him. It hits his shoulder with a crack, and at first, he does not react at all. The moment his surprise has passed however, he has darted forward and claimed a chunk of her hair in his fingers. She cries out as her body is jerked to the side, and then forced to her feet. She punches him, square in the jaw, and she thinks her knuckles may be broken.

"Let *go* of me--"

"Oh, *no*, Granger. You wanted to get *violent*, hmm? You want me to fucking *rip you apart*?" He jerks her head back, and she can both feel and hear her hair rip from her scalp.

He lets go and grabs her chin, his fingers cutting brutally against her bones and into her skin. He pulls her up until her eyes are level with the tip of his nose and she has to stand on her tiptoes to keep all her weight off her jaw and his palm. With a hard shove, the tip of her wand jabs into the soft spot beneath his jaw.

"Going to kill me?" He looks amused, and she sneers, opening her mouth to hex him, when he speaks again. "I'll rip your fucking jaw off."

But she is not the type to back down, and so she sends him flying back anyway. His grip is almost enough to stick true to his word, but it ends up only sending pain roaring up to her brain, but no breaking. At least that she can tell, because before she can even process her injuries or the ones he may have received by crashing to the ground meters away, she is on the ground herself. He has swiped her feet out from under her, and she cannot even catch a breath in before she is being scraped across the pebbles and hard ground.

She comes to a halt, coughing and choking on the dust of dirt, and cradling her head where it has smashed off a rock. She can't even see through the cloud of dirt around her, and her shirt is grabbed, ripping as he pulls her up and forward. When his hand has released her, she finds herself on her knees in front of him with his wand to the middle of her forehead.

"That was cute," he drawls, licking the blood from his mouth with a smirk. "I am thoroughly unimpressed. Is that all? The Great Third Wheel of the Gryffindor Wonder Twins, of the Hero and the Sidekick, and that's all there is? Color me unsurprised, Granger."

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," Hermione whispers, and her wand is already trained on him, though she does not know if he has noticed.

"Nuh uh." He shoves her back down when she tries to stand. "I have a fairly good idea--"

Hermione jabs her wand into the back of his knee hard enough for him to cry out and buckle. He falls on the injured one and moves to grab her at the same time she moves to hex the hell out of him. Then, it is just Malfoy with his face twisted in anger and his hand yanking a clump of her hair at the side of her head. He pauses, eyes quickly scanning and categorizing. His hand gentles, brushing her cheek in a soft graze of his palm against her skin, and she knows he doesn't realize fully what he is doing, as he is just lowering his arm. He moves then, and before she falls, she can see him wobble and jerk his knee twice to get it to move and bend. She can see nothing but the sky after that, and the wind blows dirt into her eyes. It burns, but she can't blink. She can't move at all.

She is positive it is Lavender's voice she hears next. "Oh, Hermione! I'm so sorry! I thought..."

Then it's Malfoy, overcome with frustration. "You *bleeding-heart*, shit-for-brain Gryffindors!"

Day: 449; Hour: 6

Is it warm, the day she becomes a murderer. Which is not fitting in the least, and Hermione likes things when they are fitting.

It is simply because she has no choice. She is one person, standing in front of two hooded men, and suddenly there is this impossible choice that cannot be impossible any longer. There is no time to try and disarm them both, and they have all found a way (some way) around her standard stunning spells.

It leaves her like a crack. That is how she thinks about it. Like her chest plate, all the way down her ribs, cracked open with that spoken curse. This long, splintered crack in her bones that left her irrevocably *damaged*. Broken.

Cracked. And suddenly, so suddenly, in just seconds and clicks of clocks and time, her life is changed. Forever.

She is changed. Two words, and she will never be the same sort of girl she had looked up at those two boned masks as mere moments - seconds before. She will never be the same girl who finds it easy to judge another person for being who she now is. She will never be the same girl who has never felt that bitter, acidic taste of death rolling across her taste buds, like a cancer of the mouth.

She speaks those words, and feels pain like an animal, wild and angry, tear up from her stomach. A cold creeps up from her arms, shoots across her shoulders, and drops like a waterfall to her toes. She feels as if she has woken up in a cold puddle. As if she is drowning in air.

Then, there is a *Crucio*. A Cruciatus that hurts as badly as it always has, but still somehow not enough. It is seconds or minutes (but years, and years, it feels like), and then there is Malcolm Baddock above her. She knows this despite the mask, because she had held a crush for him for two weeks in fifth year, and indulged in a fantasy that he would be different and love her despite it all (she would never tell a soul). She had looked at his face for those two weeks for hours on end, and she recognized it now.

He recognizes her as well. It is enough to make him pause, his wand aimed at her head and his boot on her chest. Enough to make her gain back enough motion to raise her wand, and she kills him too. He dies, collapsed on top of her, and she can hardly move from the curse, but she slides in centimeters and forced strength until he is off of her.

There is no Ginny to crawl into bed with. There is no Harry to hug and take comfort in. There is no Ron to throw an awkward arm around her shoulders and tell her about things she didn't want to hear about, just for the sake of not having to think about what was bothering her. There was no one.

She pukes, and cries, and stares for days. Tries to sleep, eat, and can't. Tries to wipe the feel of a Killing Curse from the lay of her bones, but finds that it has been burned into her skeleton forever.

There is no going back now. There was never any going back at all. And she feels change like the coming of winter.

Day: 460; Hour: 13

"I don't think I've been to a restaurant in years." Tonks smears butter on the roll in her hand before reaching over to snag the basket back from in front of the mischievous faces of Fred and George.

Hermione has learned over time that it is an expression perpetually etched on their faces, and that it does not matter how many times one tries to sabotage their prank, because they will find ways around it. They always find any excuse for a good joke; tonight it happens to be Harry's birthday, which Tonks decided they should celebrate despite the fact he isn't here.

Lupin takes Tonks hand under the table, or at least Hermione guesses he does by the small jump of surprise in her frame and then the smile she sends his way. Unless, of course, they are doing something completely different under the tablecloth, but this is something she absolutely does not wish to think about.

Neville swirls his straw in his drink and gives her a look that lets her know he was thinking along the same lines, and they both burst into laughter to express their horrified amusement. Fred and George grin and wait for the punch line to join in, while Lupin and Tonks exchange worried glances and shift nervously.

Day: 472; Hour: 8

She is alone in the Burrow. She had been expecting Molly, and food, and warmth of friends and family, but it is empty. It is the first time she has seen it as such, and it unsettles her.

In her hand, though, is a note from Harry. It is one sentence (*All is fine, be safe*), and at first she thinks of how little time he must have had if that was all he managed. However, yesterday morning Ginny also received a letter. Four pages of a letter, to be accurate. Hermione had been happy for her, but there is a jealousy, ugly in her throat now. She doesn't even admit its presence to herself, let alone to anyone else, but it is there.

She reads. She had thought the chance to read in quiet would have been a happily accepted break from everything. Instead, she reads the page over and over, and then just stares at lines of black for hours on end.

Day: 489; Hour: 17

Malfoy watches silent from the table as she shows Pansy how to cook. It has been a week that they have been here alone, Pansy tells her, and three days since they have run out of anything edible.

It is the first time she has seen him outside of a mission or a meeting room since they attacked one another. She acts pompous (for no reason), just because she knows it ticks him off. He glowers, and makes comments to Pansy that he knows ticks her off in reply.

It is all very juvenile, but it feels good to be that way sometimes.

Day: 492; Hour: 5

The loud, boisterous noise of laughter and friendly yelling grinds to an unbearable silence as Malfoy and Pansy walk into the house. Malfoy scopes the room as if no one is there at all as they walk through, and Pansy pulls closer to him and keeps her eyes ahead. It is the first time Hermione sees them as what they are - the exiled duo. The two friends against the world; the couple in the middle grey; the drifters without purchase in the world.

She wonders at the guts they have to have to walk into a house packed full of rowdy Gryffindors, being the people that they are, and with the pasts they carry. The balls it takes to turn sides. The bravery and strength it takes to deal with enemies and hate from your own side, and then face down your friends at the other end of that big thing call *war*, all for the belief of convictions that has turned your life inside out.

She is light from two glasses of wine, and heavy in contemplation.

Day: 495; Hour: 11

There is a grunt and a *plop-plunk* as a body hits the stone wall beside her. Her head jerks so fast to the right that it cracks, sending a line of feel-good pain jolting up into the crown of her head.

For a moment, she swears it is Blaise Zabini beside her, but she blinks and it is Lee Jordan now. A stark contrast, the pale white hands against the dark of his skin, tilting his face up. Hermione follows those long fingers to wide wrists, and she already knows who it is before she follows up his forearms.

"What were you hit with?" His cultured accent is clipped and urgent, and for a man who always tries to pretend calm in bad situations, to look as if he is losing his cool, she now knows that their mission is as blown to hell as she thought.

"I-- Don't. Don't know." Lee gasps and wheezes, and blood is spraying from his mouth with each exhale.

It lands in tiny splatters all down Malfoy's neck and shirt. He tilts Lee's head back farther, assessing his eyes, before dropping his hands away with a nod.

"Alright. Where is your Portkey?"

"I…" Lee seizes in pain, clenching his eyes shut as he tries to move for his back pocket.

Malfoy purses his lips briefly and mutters an oath, looking up at the towering black and moss-ridden stone as he reaches into Lee's pocket and grabs the Portkey. He glances over at her then, the only other witness to the fact that he has touched a man's ass, but looks unfazed by her presence.

"Are you injured?" His eyes sweep the length of her, but it is not her blood that soaks her pants - though she supposes it looks more like she may have peed herself.

"What... fuck... think." Lee winces, his whole face scrunching, and he sounds now as if he is trying to swallow his tonsils.

"Not you, fuckwit," Malfoy mutters, looking perturbed as more bright red splashes his shirt, and though she thinks he may freak out, he doesn't.

"I'm fine," Hermione replies, finally, because she feels she can breathe a little now.

He looks sharply back at her, no doubt wondering why she's fine but still seems to be sitting this one out. He is observant, though, and it doesn't take him long to piece together the story behind her position and the Death Eater dead at her feet. He looks back up at her from the crooked mask, meeting her eyes, and they are wider and more grey than she has ever remembered them to be. He looks as if he's assessing her for a potential mental breakdown, and preparing himself for just how bad it will be. There is nothing, though, but knowing in his eyes when he looks away.

"I can... I can..." Lee shakes his head, and Malfoy opens the ring box, pulling out the band and shoving it onto Lee's finger.

"You can't, actually."

It is just her and Malfoy then, and it surprises her when he turns off his haunches and collapses back against the wall. They are silent for what feels to her like forever, but it is just a minute.

"You were with Team B?"

"Osbie is dead. I saw...the boy with the red hair. I saw him go down too." This doesn't answer his question, but it is the first thing she thinks to say.

Malfoy is still, then nods. "The girl with the braids is dead. That bloke... that... Anthony, he's either back at Headquarters or on a beach somewhere. Finch-Fletchley spotted Team C and took off."

"What? We aren't supposed to leave our team members..." But she trails off, because she is a stickler for the rules, but not many people trust Malfoy to guard their backs.

Anthony probably thought his chance of survival was better with the other team. In fact, the only people she has ever heard *say* they trusted Malfoy was Pansy and... And Neville, as strange as that is to acknowledge (*He saved my* life *Hermione*).

"You beckoned?" A man with dark blond hair and a stubby beard is beside her, and it scares her so badly, because she should have seen him coming a mile away.

"What?" she breathes and tries to calm the wild beating.

"You activated the emergency coin..." His eyes have drifted beside her, to Malfoy now, and once she thinks about it, she can now feel the pulsing heat of it in her pocket.

"We'll wait to see how many of us are dead." Malfoy gives for explanation.

They are mostly silent for twenty minutes, and at the end of their impatience, they find themselves with less than half. Six out of fifteen (eight including the ones too injured to keep there).

"We need a new plan." Malfoy cuts all the edges.

"We *need* to pull *out*. We don't have enough people--" Dean starts.

"We *do* have enough people. It goes like this - we can either go in and finish the job in a sweep, or we can go and have them send us back in with the same amount of people tomorrow," the older blond man beside her cuts in.

They are quiet as the distant sounds of Unforgivables ring out. It is either two Death Eaters in confusion, or one of their own who wasn't able to make it back yet (or at all).

"Fine. Fine. So say we do stay. There's no way the six of us can take on...*however many* of them there are. Which, I might add, seems like a hell of a lot." The girl, who has a striking resemblance to Ginny, pokes at a section of the wall.

An argument erupts for the span of nearly ten minutes over different tactics that can be attempted, with more bickering than any ground covered, and a lot of people backing out and agreeing depending on the plan. Malfoy, it takes her a few of those

minutes to realize, is growing more anxious with each passing one. He shifts, and yanks at his shirt, and rubs at his hands, and constantly pushes his hair off his face. Finally, just as Cho has reached a pitch near inhuman, he breaks.

"We go in as a group." It is amazing how precisely his voice can cut through noise and leave people paying attention. "We'll take the right, around the hedge garden…here."

He moves forward, facing them, and touches the tip of his wand to the ground. He takes a fortifying breath, mutters something to himself, and then begins to draw a game plan in the dirt.

It is the best, most sensible plan she has heard since the very beginning (even back in the boardroom with the *professionals*), and so she agrees the moment he is done presenting it. Four of the others fall in short order, and after much hesitation, she believes Dean is swayed more by his loyalty to her (or, perhaps, to Harry and Ron) than his distrust of anything Malfoy.

It is the first time she realizes how great of a strategist he is, despite how much he seems to hate being the one to step up and do it. So, when all six of them and the two more they find injured make it out alive and (fairly) well, she thanks him. It is the only thing he gets for coming up with something that saved them and the mission, but he still doesn't even look at her when she says it.

Day: 500; Hour: 12

It is pink and light, light purple through the leaves on the trees. The wind blows gentle on her cheek, and she closes her eyes and smiles.

Some pleasures in life are very small, but she enjoys them all the same.

Day: 505; Hour: 3

"I'm telling you, there is *no way* we can pull this off with only eight people!" Hermione slams her hand onto the table, making the coffee in Dean's mug slosh over the side.

"And I am telling *you* that you don't have a choice! I am a professional--"

"I don't care! I don't care who you are--"

"Hermione," Dean whispers, takes her wrist.

She yanks it away, because she is tired. She is tired of all these *professionals* waltzing in and shortchanging them on people and supplies, and shipping them out to a badly planned mission. She is so *tired* of it.

"It's only a recon mission, Hermione. We just have to get past a couple people and get some documents--" Colin tries.

"We need--"

"Fine! Fine, if you have such a problem with it, Granger, then *leave*."

"Excuse me?"

"Walk out! Go back to your cozy Burrow and home cooked meals, and leave this as a seven person job--"

"I take--"

"Go!"

"No!"

"*Go*!"

"I said no! I--"

"And *I* say, that if you don't like the fucking plan, get *out*. This is what's going to happen. There is no changing it, or fighting about it. You have two options; hate it and leave, or deal with it and stay."

There is silence, and Hermione braces herself against it. Pride is the biggest, most jagged thing to ever work your throat muscles around. Dean tugs again, and she sits. Sits, and stares, and burns up like a fever in her blood.

Fishier continues smugly, and when he is finished, he stares at her on his journey out of the room. Papers are shuffled and chairs scraped, and Hermione shakes her head. "You guys are honestly satisfied with this plan? Eight people, and he wants us to take *these* routes in."

Parkinson snorted, though she is one of the last people Hermione expects to reply. "Got a better idea, Granger? Unless you can magic people out of your arse, I don't see any other option."

"We can change the plan at least." Dean shrugs, eying the lines of blue on the board in front of them.

"He's a professional. He knows better about what--"

"I swear, Colin. Shut it up," Hermione breathes, rolling her fingers across the headache in her temples, and meeting his eyes when he looks up from his paper. "We can't split into pairs of two. It's not safe in the least. What if only one pair encounters the whole lot of who will be there?"

"So..."

"So, we'll go in as a group." Hermione stands, swallows, makes her way around the table and to the board. "All eight of us--"

"That's as ridiculous as traveling in pairs, Granger," Malfoy drawls, focusing the room's attention on him.

He looks bored, leaning back and relaxed in his chair, stretching out. The last time she had suggested a change of plans he had been the first one out of the door. The fact that he was still seated and now even participating just enforced how crocked she knew this was.

"Why? If we--"

"Two groups. One from the East, one from the West. Fishier already said the back was barred. We bar the front somehow before we go in. We'll sweep the rooms, meet in the middle, then check the North and South." Parkinson shrugs, and Malfoy stares back at her in what she takes as droll acceptance.

There is a pulse of strangeness in the air. As if everyone were sitting up and paying attention to every word and movement, because they know it is important. If Hermione went with this plan, it was showing a little faith in Parkinson, in Malfoy. In the closest thing to an enemy allowed in these rooms. They stayed because they are willing to see if they can lend any fraction of trust to the idea formed by a Muggle-born. Hermione thinks she might be able to return the favor.

"Alright. Alright, yes," she breathes, clears her throat and turns back to the board with seven waiting and watching eyes locked on her. "So...how are we going to block the front?"

Day: 511; Hour: 18

They talk about her behind her back, she knows. Some of them stretch their imagination to find out why it is she trusts Malfoy enough to follow the path he forges. Hermione will tell them, if given the opportunity, that it is because, no matter who he is or what he's done, she is willing to use the skills he has to further the advantage to their side. Hermione may be stubborn and proud, but the last thing she would do is sabotage herself and friends over her dislike for someone else.

If Malfoy is willing to give, then why shouldn't they take? Hermione is cautious of Malfoy, because she knows that he is dangerous. Perhaps not in the sense that he is a spy for Voldemort, because she thinks he wouldn't have helped at all so far. But she leaves that as a possibility, because she knows that he might be planning on sinking deeper into their circle by playing their game. Yet, she knows for a fact, that Malfoy is dangerous as a *person*. He was volatile, prone to fits of anger, and she always made sure to stay on guard when she was around him. At the same time, she gives him enough reluctant trust to let him lead, because he's good at it -- and Hermione has far too many worries over the other side to think too much about anything that may come from hers.

Guards are moving up between her and *them*, her fellow Order members, but she waits out the whispers and rumors, because there is always a price to be paid for doing something good.

Day: 522; Hour: 20

"Rewrite it."

"What?"

Hermione tosses the marker to him, and it spins across the table and into the palm he has placed at the edge to block it from falling. She realizes that he probably will refuse simply on the grounds of her 'ordering' him, so she backtracks.

"I've been to this place before. In fact, I'm pretty sure you were on that mission with me, Malfoy. This layout isn't even *accurate*. The infiltration is good until we hit the doors, and after that, this whole plan is shot. I think you should rewrite it."

"Hermione... are you *crazy*?" Seamus leans forward, shaking his head slowly.

Malfoy stares at her across the room, still seemingly in a state of surprise. Then Pansy is whispering something in his ear, and by the look on her face, Hermione doesn't know if it's something negative about her or about Malfoy. She guesses the latter, considering the hard look he throws at the pinched-face girl. Sliding his chair

back, he falters for a second, and then rounds the table.

"Are you fucking serious--"

"Seamus, don't talk to me like that. That language is completely unnecessary," Hermione whispers, leaning away from his hiss in her ear.

"We're bringing you to St. Mungo's--"

"She has her angry face on now." Dean sniffs.

"Let's just see what he has to say." Neville breaks up the oncoming storm.

Seamus throws his hands palm up and shakes his head at the other man. Neville only nods to where Malfoy is squiggling and crossing on the board.

"If we hate it, we tell the wanker to go sod off. If we like it, we'll do it."

"He could be in cahoots with the Death--"

"Just stop, Seamus." Hermione shakes her head, but she is watching Malfoy's tactic play out on the board.

"You, of all people--"

"I don't *trust* him, Seamus! He just... he pulled us out of a really bad situation a few weeks ago, and he's *good*. He's here to fight for our side. I don't know *why*, but he *is*, so we should use his abilities as much as we can!"

Seamus snorts and guffaws, but he will follow by the end of it. They all will.

Day: 524; Hour: 21

When Pansy sits in the worn recliner diagonal from her, she does not have the faintest idea that she will end up talking to her for well over three hours. It is full of uncomfortable pauses and awkward shifts, and is about everything and nothing all at once.

Hermione is desperate for communication, she realizes. She needs conversation and with someone other than herself, and perhaps Pansy does as well, and that is why they don't walk away from one another even when it feels so right to do so. They don't speak of war, or Malfoy, or Harry and Ron, but they speak -- and that is

enough.

Day: 538; Hour: 15

They hit a long period of time where absolutely nothing happens. She knows that the Death Eaters are planning something, but she also knows that her side is planning just as fervently, and that it is not her job to plan. So she waits, waits, and waits, and so much time passes that she finds herself feeling like she did before the war. Like knowing it is going to come, but not really grasping it. She is so used to empty time, and reading books, and visiting friends, that she feels safe when she closes her eyes at night. Her birthday is worry free, and almost normal, and with far more friends showing up than last year.

After such a long time, when she hears the undercurrent of news sweep up from the floorboards of the safe houses that there is a team going out to infiltrate a Death Eater hideout, she goes back into the mind of war with something else to fight for. She wants it as badly in her bones as she needs her equality.

She wants *peace*.

Because it is the most beautiful feeling she's ever known.

Day: 582; Hour: 10

He had come because of Pansy.

Pansy, who decided to turn traitor to her family ties. Pansy, who no one ever saw coming. He didn't trust her to be alone, and his only other option was leaving her at it and running until someone caught up. He chose to take his punishment, and remain by the side of his only friend who hadn't received the Mark burned into their forearm. He showed up with his wand drawn, offering information, money, and the Manor. He was Stupefied and locked in the Ministry holding cells for a month (though it would have been longer had it not been for Pansy) before anyone would take him up on it.

He loved her, Hermione knows, though she isn't sure if it's in the way of friendship or a beloved. They didn't hold hands, or touch one another, or share smiles. But she had seen him take Pansy to his bed four times, and saw him kiss her once just as shadows against a dark blue curtain fell. Still, she had seen friends reach for friends before, and Draco and Pansy had not been the first unsure couple she had witnessed emerging from a bedroom in the morning.

She died with Hermione still unsure. Sometimes she thinks about his reaction. Sometimes she imagines him violent and in a spitting rage; other times, she sees him silent and mournful, and with such a beautiful sadness it could clean rip your heart out of your chest. All the same, she was dead. Dead, and gone, and lost like the others, and Draco's mourning just melded into the air of war. It no longer mattered if he was in love with Pansy, or if he thought to marry her, or that if they were a couple, they didn't act like it. All that mattered was that he had loved her, in some way, and that the rebellious girl with jet-black hair and a fierce glare was the reason he was here.

She saw him, at her funeral. She felt awkward and unsure, but she had known Pansy in a distant sort of way, and she felt loss with her passing. No one really questioned her request to go, besides a slightly interested look from Lupin, and she had stuck to the back of the small gathering. Her eyes had looked to the blond more than they should have, but it is in her nature to be ready for someone else's breakdown. He did nothing though, but stood and stared, and he stayed when it was over. She whispered something she can't now recall when she passed him, aiming for something brief and soothing, but he just kept staring at the gravestone. She imagines his loss must be something like how it would feel to lose one of her best friends, and it made the sadness sharper to her somehow. There was sympathy for him, and it was something she never thought she would feel in regards to the blond.

He seemed to have lost his footing a little after Pansy died. Hermione imagines he looked around himself and wondered what he was doing and why he was even still there. Then, after two months and one week, he was suddenly back. Back with all the conviction of revenge, and fighting for something more than just survival. Hermione is pretty sure he is still fighting for Pansy; probably for a lot of other reasons too, but for her most of all.

It was this sort of loyalty, and the kind that led him there to begin with, that first intrigued her about him. That made her see the first thin link between him and her - their fierce devotion to their friends, damn the consequence. Though, while Hermione was devoted to nearly everyone, he seemed only devoted to Pansy. Only very few people earned that position in his life, where they deserved his loyalty. After Pansy died, he switched that loyalty to the cause, though it really was still *for her*.

If Pansy had died earlier, she doesn't think he would have stayed. He was so uncomfortable in his skin around them, and had he not had enough time to grow so used to that feeling, she suspects he would have walked out the second he got the news. Would be in some distant country, removed so far from the option of sides, the name of a traitor, the ghost of the past, the hardships of war and the debt of a

Malfoy, that he could fade into obscurity and live his life alone and away from all the reminders of who he was and who he tried to be.

But, he hadn't.

He stayed.

Draco Malfoy has something to prove, she figures. To Pansy, to his father, to them, to himself; any or all, she doesn't know. But he is out for something more than what he had ever come in with. Hermione doesn't know if he'll ever find it.

Day: 619; Hour: 7

"I heard we're winning."

Hermione gives Anthony a sharp look. "There's no way to possibly know that."

"More Death Eaters have been captured or killed in the past three months than we've had on our side."

"That doesn't always mean something." Lavender joins the conversation from the porch, a slim cigarette resting between her fingers. She picked up the dirty habit a month ago, when she came back from the Muggle world after three weeks.

"Sure it does. Look, they are losing more, and the war is cooling down. We don't have as many battles or Death Eater occurrences anymore--"

"That's because they thought they could defeat us by going all out in the beginning. They just wanted to attack, attack, attack without any real planning behind it. Take us by surprise and overwhelm us. When it stopped working, they stopped doing it. It's going into more strategy now." Dean speaks up from the broom he is polishing to be ready for the Quidditch match they are playing at Grimmauld tomorrow.

A group of them decided it was time to release some tension in a friendly match, which quickly turned into three matches, with the amount of people who decided they want to play. It is a show of how different things have turned now, Hermione thinks, because there had never been time or energy for that in the beginning of this all.

Day: 630; Hour: 14

There are footsteps coming down the hall, and when they pause, Hermione turns her head over her shoulder to look at Malfoy. For a moment he seems just as surprised to see her, but then it is gone, and his eyes are on the sink as he moves toward it. Hermione blinks and looked back out the window, where Ginny is grinning as she teases the other team for the goal she just scored.

"Why aren't you out there?" She isn't sure why she even asked, but there it is, hanging in the silence he creates.

At first she doesn't think he will answer, but then he makes a sound in his throat over the running water from the tap. "I fight enough not to volunteer myself for another."

"It's a game."

"Is that so." It's not a question, because they both know the answer. Every Bludger in the air would find its way to Malfoy's head. Hermione doesn't know why she didn't realize this first, but perhaps she did, and just wanted to try and take the awkwardness out of the air.

She feels bad for bringing it up, despite who he is, because that is her nature. She never intends to cause other people hurt, unless they deserve it. She hasn't spoken or even been in close proximity with Malfoy since Pansy died, so he hasn't done anything to deserve any cruelty from her. As far as she has heard, Malfoy has been just as much a part of Order's side as she has been since the war began. Sometimes she gets so caught up in the present, that she forgets she can damn him for the past. And a lot of times, she gets so concentrated on what is wrong *now*, that she forgets to care about the past at all. Why taunt a member of her own side when there was a war to fight? She puts it down to maturity, or something she doesn't understand.

She imagines herself on that tower sometimes, but not as herself, but Malfoy. She imagines the circumstance she heard he was under, and pictures what Dumbledore must look like through slate grey eyes that never saw any help come from the twinkling blue across from him. She thinks about her wand held out in front of her, and *why* she must do it, but always fails when she tries to find out if she would. What if it was Snape, with loyalties to the other side? Her wand would level out, she thinks. Would she be able to follow through, knowing what was on the line? Maybe now. Yes, now, maybe. And she hates herself for that just a little, because she knows she can kill when it comes to the choice between herself and her friends, against a Death Eater.

Draco Malfoy couldn't. Not then, at that point, just as much as she is not sure she could have then either. It is strange, looking through the scope of Malfoy's life, and wondering. If she just changed some of the key players, what if it had been her? She thinks about it a lot, because now when there is hardly anyone around she knows, there is a lot of thinking to be done. Malfoy's name comes up, or she sees him across lengths, and she *thinks*. And, most of the time, she *understands*. Because Hermione has always been the sort of person who wanted, and could see the world through someone else's vantage point. Not a Death Eater, not an enemy, but someone who might prove themselves to be something more worthy than her hate.

So she pictures it as herself at that tower, with the Order creeping through the passage she opened for them, and an enemy to their side standing across from her. Her parents and herself are on the line, and all her friends as well, because if she can achieve it, she would mark an important victory to her side. Does she do it?

And at the moment when those pretend emotions manifest themselves into her body, until they are boiling up and choking her at the base of her throat, her view will change. It will be Malfoy, standing across from her, and her through the eyes of Dumbledore, and suddenly her understanding of why Malfoy did it will rest entirely on Dumbledore's understanding. But she will never know the answer, will she? Not ever.

Malfoy is gone by the time she pulls herself from her thoughts, and the Quidditch game continues with just as much good cheer as it had begun.

Day: 640; Hour: 10

The Death Eaters attack three villages on Christmas Day, and there is only Ginny, Fred, and herself at the Burrow. They try conversation, and getting into the holiday spirit, but are too worried and the day feels nothing like Christmas at all.

Instead, they wait until they are sure that everyone they are going to order to go has already gone, and get drunk off cheap champagne and eggnog.

Day: 643; Hour: 12

Moody walks in step with Malfoy, and it is the first time she has seen the patch over his eye in so many months that it looks strange now. She is stunned by their sudden appearance across the street in Muggle England, and wonders what it is they are doing here, despite that it is information she is likely not privy too. Just as much as Malfoy is not privy to the reason why she is there.

They are speaking, and Moody suddenly looks amused before clamping a hand over Malfoy's shoulder and replying to what was said. Hermione blinks at the contact because Moody isn't one for it, and it's gone before she fully acknowledges that it was there. Malfoy must have done something to please him, as that small gesture was all that Harry ever received from the man when he had achieved something Moody thought an accomplishment. It feels odd seeing him give Malfoy the same acknowledgment, and she almost runs straight into the woman in front of her from being so distracted.

When she looks up again, Moody and Malfoy are both looking back at her, and Moody gives a slight nod before her view is blocked by a bus. When it passes, they are gone.

Four

Day: 645; Hour: 11

Hermione had passed them again yesterday, which marked it twice in a row, and couldn't help but wonder what they were doing there. This afternoon she delivered the package handed to her that morning and received another to take back with her. She has no idea what any of the packages over the past three days have contained, but being a delivery girl at the moment is a lot more appealing than what she had been doing a month ago.

"Granger." Hermione spins quickly, nearly falling over the man brushing past her, and stares white-faced back at Moody. He doesn't look impressed.

She wonders if he had been waiting for her, as she had passed him the last two days at the same time going in the opposite direction. Now it is later, and she is on her way home, but there he is. "Sir."

Malfoy stands just behind and to the side of Moody, his eyes somewhere above her head. She had thought they were done with whatever they were doing when she had failed to pass them earlier.

"I believe you acquired something of importance to myself. We'll have lunch." She doesn't think she has ever heard Moody make anything less than demands.

She nods, slightly, and waits for him to begin to walk so she can follow him to the location. She makes sure to stay beside him, so she does not feel like a tag-along, and so she is not behind Malfoy. Malfoy seems to have the same idea however, and takes the spot on the other side of Moody.

Lunch is a strange affair, and when all she orders is a cup of tea, she is greeted with glances from both men. She has not been eating much, she knows, and is aware that it shows a little. Sometimes she can eat like she is ravenous, and other times it is days that she goes with soup or crackers before she eats much of anything at all.

"I said lunch, not tea time." Moody stares at her until she orders a salad, and when he continues to stare, she orders fish, though she knows she will not eat it.

There is not much conversation, though she notices that Malfoy and Moody seem far more relaxed in one another's presence than she would have ever thought. It

reminds her of the pat to the shoulder she had seen a few days ago, and wonders just how much time they have spent together. Malfoy was constantly involved in missions, she had heard, and maybe that was why.

Hermione breaks the silence by asking Moody questions to be sure of his identity. With the incident at Hogwarts, the fact that they were at war, and the odd timing of today, she knew she could not be too sure. Moody seems to know this as well, and though he scowls at her through the whole process, he responds to her inquiries.

Malfoy stayed relatively silent as they ate, and spends most of the time staring out the window in front of him. His shoe scuffed hers when he sprawled out his legs more under the table, but he didn't acknowledge that he had.

Moody stood with the package safely tucked into his coat and left to pay the bill. Hermione searches for something to say in the tense air left at the table, and when Malfoy seems to recognize that she is doing so, he levels his eyes on her. The last hint of the sun turns his eyes bright and takes the tint of yellow from his platinum hair. For a moment she is comparing and contrasting the differences in the structure of his face, until his solid gaze makes her uncomfortable. He still leaves it on her once she's looked away, and it remains until they stand and must head for the door.

"I'll see you at home at eight," Moody tells her, and they move in the opposite direction before she has a chance to respond.

Day: 645; Hour: 17

Padma lets out a huff of breath between her teeth and shakes her head.

"Is there a problem, Patil?" Moody turns his eyes toward her, his face just as stern as it had been when he announced the news.

"No." She lingers over words, unsure, and then rushes on. "I just don't understand why we have to have a... leader." She turns her disapproving eyes toward Malfoy, who seems bored in the center of the room.

"Yes, I suppose you wouldn't, considering the dismal mission you helped to fail two weeks ago," Moody snaps, and she blushes. "A leader is someone skilled enough for the position, and who can be turned to if the need for a backup plan comes during the mission. A leader eliminates procrastination on what to do, like your team's three hour indecision last mission, and provides a plan everyone must follow immediately to get the job done."

Padma gives a tense nod, avoiding his eyes now. Hermione turns her own attention from the girl and back to Moody. It seems as though she wasn't the only person now to recognize Malfoy's abilities and determine it to be a good option to use them. Moody looks over his shoulder at Malfoy, and the younger man steps forward, laying out the plan.

When he is finished, there is silence. Hermione isn't sure if it is because they all agree, or because Moody seems to have accepted the plan and will refuse for it to be changed.

"Alright. One a.m., front door."

Day: 646; Hour: 22

Hermione shoves the cloth of her shirt into her mouth to stop herself from coughing too loudly. Someone had just blown a hole through one of the stone walls, and the dust of rock is choking up her lungs.

She is bleeding. She had taken a rock to her left arm, and she is nearly positive that it is broken. She holds it over the wound at her side, but can't help but be thankful it was the most damage the Death Eater could do before Neville got him. She thinks she is bleeding at her back as well, hit with a slashing curse, because she can feel it burning and the waistband of her pants are wet.

The slashing curse hit her just seconds after she lost sight of Anthony's back, and that was near the beginning. She knows she has been bleeding for a while now, and isn't sure if it is that or the lack of clean oxygen that is making her dizzy. Neville had found her, and she had followed him through corridors until this last explosion. He has been out of her sight for at least a quarter of an hour, and she has found no one but a single Death Eater.

Her panic is a solid mass inside her chest, her heart beating wildly, and she has to feel along the wall as she walks just to keep her balance. Neville had told her they had found the pensieve they had come for, which is good, because Hermione has been to more than one mission in which the Order's spies have been wrong. They must have been pulling out now, she knew, and she is horrified at the thought that they might have left her.

Her mind is disoriented, her feet clumsy as she tries to remember how to get out. Her cloak, with her Portkey wadded inside one of the pockets, was left beneath the rock and debris that had fallen on it. Hermione supposes it was just her luck to have taken it off before the explosion. If she hadn't been hit in the side and decided to use

a scrap of it to wrap around her middle, she would be out of here by now.

She hears rushed feet behind her, and turns. The world spins with her, speeding up, and whirls until she hits the ground. Her wand is still up, pointed at the figure until her vision clears enough and she can see it is Neville. She lowers her wand, bracing tired fingers against the rough stone floor, but then she is hauled to her feet with no attempt by herself. She panics, a strangled cry forcing its way out of her stone-dust covered lips as the arm tightens around her and she's pressed against moving hardness with a grunt from behind her. She points her wand at the arm pressing so hard into her, but the world tips and blinks to black.

For a dread-filled moment, she is sure she has fallen to unconsciousness, but then suddenly there is Anthony and Terry in front of her against bright blue walls and blinding lights. She registers that mercifully, she can't be held captive by a Death Eater given the distant familiarity of the safe house they are in. Neville appears before her, looking disorientated himself, and then she is gone again. She closes her eyes, a mew rising up from her throat as she grabs the arm around her for some semblance of balance, and holds back the need to vomit from all the spinning.

Grimmauld Place then, and it is three seconds after her arrival of utter silence before the living room bursts into activity. The arm releases her as Lupin performs a Levitation spell on her, and questions are thrown out as he brings her to what she assumes will be the small, makeshift infirmary. As she struggles to keep her nerves calm and focus, she raises her head, bypassing the image of a surprised Lavender and Colin, and settles her eyes on the figure directly ahead of her. Malfoy stands, staring after her, covered in her blood.

Her dirty, dirty blood.

Day: 662; Hour: 9

The window is open, and Hermione half expects to see water covering the wall beneath, but it is dry. The rain is coming down in a constant heavy shower, and the wind flaps the summer green leaves wildly in its wake. Thunder rumbles, and halts, and rumbles deeper, and for a moment Hermione forgets she is a witch and worries that the power will go out.

It has been just under three weeks since she last saw Malfoy, blood-caked, in the living room at Grimmauld Place. She has thought a lot about it since, and could see like a photograph, the image of him at the back of her eyelids. She wonders constantly how he must have felt that night, with Mud blood all over him. He had done it willingly though. He had come from behind, when she didn't have her cloak,

and he must have seen.

She imagines the old Draco Malfoy would have left her there, before daring to even come close to the proximity of her 'dirty blood'. Hell, the old Malfoy would have been the one to cause it, in all likelihood.

Had his beliefs changed so drastically? There had still been this part of her that was holding out for the fallout of him. That was waiting for him to be found out for spying on them, and that all the things she had seen from him had simply been his way to dig into them deeper. Yet he had still passed the Veritaserum test when he was still in jail, and the Legilimency test after that, hadn't he? Or else he wouldn't have been there at all. And even if he had somehow managed to find his way around the truth being found out then, if he was really still a Death Eater at heart, why would he have touched her at all, let alone bloody, when he could have waited for Neville to Portkey her out? A Death Eater, undercover or not, would have *never* done such a thing.

And isn't that a startling truth. Malfoy was on *their* side, he must have been -- and perhaps he was fighting for a different reason, but the fact remained that he was still fighting for *them*. His old beliefs and prejudices must have tapered off somewhere, and maybe it was at the top of a tower, or the first time he put the orange Phoenix cloth around his arm, or when he buried Pansy Parkinson. But they had all the same, to a good enough extent that he was here with the same purpose as the rest of them. To win the war, to defeat Voldemort, no matter how much Muggle blood he got all over his expensive trousers or Pure blood he would end up with on his hands.

She watches him now, through the window, a clot of black and a flare of white. The sun is low as the rain drizzles out, the clouds moving to shine down golden through the layers of trees. Fog wraps around the branches, and with the light, it looks as if it is raining tiny drops of the sun. Malfoy is standing in front of two large oaks, his boots sunk in mud, and himself soaking wet.

Hermione doesn't know why he stands there, waiting out the rain, or why he leans his shoulder against one of the trunks like he's going to keep on waiting. It's very odd, but there's a sort of peace in the set of his bones that she has never seen before.

Later, he will walk in to find her sitting at the table, and his feet will slosh in the water inside his boots when he steps. She will briefly think of thanking him for the last mission in the same sort of way he had 'thanked' her many missions before, but will decide to be the better person. It will escape her in a rush, and he will pause

with his back to her and his foot poised to step out of the kitchen. He will reply low and raspy, as if he hadn't used his voice in months, and tell her if it hadn't been him then it would have been someone else.

But it was *you,* she will say, and he will keep walking.

Day: 665; Hour: 8

She had written a four-page letter to Harry and Ron two months ago, and never received a reply. She finds the envelope unopened on Arthur Weasley's desk as he talks to her about the possibility of using Muggle communication devices. He pauses in his excitement, and she looks up after a moment to meet a gaze that is far quieter in emotions than she has ever seen on him.

"No letters in or out yet, Hermione."

"That was two months ago."

He pushes hers aside, revealing another envelope. "Mine has been waiting for three."

Day: 667; Hour: 3

Lavender is sitting at the table at one in the morning, and Hermione has to pause in her step at the way she looks so flustered. Lavender hasn't look flustered since the last Hogwarts' ball, as far as Hermione's recollection goes, and it's a damn good one.

"What's wrong?"

"It was just...strange."

"What was?"

Lavender looks at her for a very long time, until she realizes that Hermione isn't walking away without an answer. "I just slept with Malfoy."

Hermione can feel her head pull back in surprise, though she doesn't know *why* she is so surprised. Lavender sleeps with a lot of people. *People* sleep with a lot of people. "Oh."

"He was... He was rough, but I was expecting it. But he didn't even look at me.

Not once. Just pushed my knickers and his pants down and…did it."

"You didn't want him to?" Hermione hears her voice go thick and quick, because it does that when she feels the need to move but doesn't allow herself to.

"No, no, I did." Her muscles unclench and she lets the breath out from the ball in her throat. "But…it was so odd. And then he just waited for not even two seconds, let go of me, pulled up his trousers, and nodded at the door."

"Oh."

"I feel… used." Hermione briefly wonders if Lavender realizes that 'using' is exactly what all the men have done with her. "I mean, I'm the one who approached him. I didn't know if he would give in, but he's gone a couple of months from what I hear--"

"You approached him?" It must have taken some gall on her part.

"Why not? Touch a man's chest and tell them you don't have any knickers on, and--"

"Classy."

Lavender rolled her eyes. "It's not that hard to make them interested when you are, I mean. But then he just made this sound, which bothered me. Like he had offers all day and had to keep throwing them off or something, when I *know* no one around here--"

"Lavender, I really--"

"And then he just shoved me into the wall, no foreplay or anything. He didn't even kiss me, which was so odd. I mean, it wasn't bad. I just… didn't expect that. That's *never* happened to me before. Usually a man wants to touch me all--"

"Good night." Hermione's face contorted as she turned from the kitchen, because she doesn't want to hear about Lavender's sex life in the least.

Thinking of Lavender's sex life was odd enough for her, but Malfoy's was even further out of that range. She had heard at Hogwarts when he dated Pansy, and then another Slytherin, she could never remember the name of. Besides a few overheard conversations on the Slytherin's attractiveness, that had been about all she heard on the matter. She might have *known* that he was having sex with Pansy,

or at least thought so, and perhaps one or two others, but it wasn't something she had to *think* about. Or worse, be supplied the details of, as Lavender just attempted.

Now she has to go through life knowing Malfoy's rough in bed, and Lavender likes to be touched all over. Wonderful.

Day: 669; Hour: 2

"Is it horrible to say that I always thought it was so cheesy when I arrived at Hogwarts and found out witches really *do* fly on brooms?"

"Why is that cheesy?" Ginny comes to a halt and hovers beside her.

"Because it was almost like a joke or something. In the Muggle world, it was a cliché in all the books and movies that witches rode on brooms, cackling in front of the moon or something."

Ginny gives her a bemused look. "It's the truth, though, isn't it?"

Hermione shrugs after giving the ground a hard look. "I suppose it depends on what you know first. That affects everything you perceive after."

Ginny nods sagely, and flies around Hermione's unmoving form again. "That's life, Hermione. Hop on."

"What?"

"Hop on. You're bored, I can see it. Terribly bored, and I'm just as bored just floating here with you ground-ridden. So get on."

"I don't like to fly, Ginny, you know that--"

"Oh, yes. The big, tough Gryffindor afraid of heights." Hermione glowers and Ginny laughs. "Come on."

Hermione eyes the broom in speculation, and then the woman astride it. "I don't know."

Ginny dips her head before making her voice deeper. "I promise I'll be gentle."

Hermione barks a laugh and shakes her head. "Will you hold me tight?"

"With my rippling muscles, love."

"You're an idiot."

"And you're a coward." Ginny grins, dropping the manly act and tapping the front of the broom. "Come here and ride my stick."

"Oh, my God! Ginny!" Hermione blushes hot red and laughs at the same time, embarrassed because all sexual innuendo makes her embarrassed, even when it's nothing more than a joke.

She climbs on in the end, and Ginny doesn't pull any tricks and keeps the broom low, and Hermione forgets about everything but having fun with a friend for the first time in a very, very long time.

Day: 674; Hour: 12

She wonders how long he stood in the doorway watching her devour her food before she spotted him. She had just been depraved of food for almost three days except for a small package of biscuits she had to sustain herself with. Needless to say, as soon as she arrived at the stark white house, she headed right for the kitchen.

She hasn't seen him in close proximity for weeks, since the morning after Lavender's confession. Even then, he had been in the other room as Lavender gave him saucy looks and he completely ignored her. Lavender had eventually given up and retreated to Hermione's side, where she once again ran commentary on his weirdness.

"Is there anything left?" She can't make out his facial features in the darkness, but he sounds amused, and it surprises her.

"I'm hungry," she snaps back, because she *is*, and she is also moody when she's starving to death.

When he emerges into the kitchen fully, there is no trace of amusement on his face. She isn't sure if that's because of her reply, or if she has just imagined it in the first place. She feels minutely bad for snapping at him, especially as he may not have meant it in a bad context, and so offers him back up the middle ground. Malfoy may not deserve her feeling bad about anything when it came to him, but she had always made steps in her life to prevent herself from stepping on anyone who was being trampled on by everyone else.

Considering that they hadn't gotten into a physical altercation in nearly a year, she figures she's allowed to feel a little bad for being mean if she wants. "There's noodles left in the pot if you want them."

He digs around in the pantry instead, which is good, because when he emerges with a can of soup she takes the rest of the noodles for herself. He stands and watches her while she unloads the rest into her bowl, and it makes her nervous.

"What?"

"There's only one pot in the house, Granger." He explains this as if he has had to explain it to her every day for the past year.

"Oh. Sorry." The apology slips out without a thought, and it immediately makes her uncomfortable that she just apologized to *him* of all people.

He says nothing, but looks at her for a long moment before accepting the pot when she holds it out for him. He turns for the sink and grabs the washcloth, and she is struck by the oddness of Draco Malfoy doing dishes. He is probably aware of this, or of her watching him, or just of her being there at all, because his back and shoulders are set in rigid lines as he turns on the tap.

"Have you been here long?" She knows what persuaded her to ask; she hasn't spoken to another individual in over a week, and there is desperation here.

He doesn't seem willing to answer her, so she sits and shifts, and waits for him to speak or leave. The tap turns off, and she hears him squeeze the washcloth dry. Ron, Harry, Lavender, and Dean never squeeze them dry, and it has always annoyed her to no end.

"Long enough." And this could have meant two minutes to her, with as much as this particular house gave her the creeps.

He moves to the stove to set the pot down, and she watches out of the corner of her eye as he moves for the can opener in the drawer. The faint light from the window hits his shirt and she sucks in a breath.

"You're injured."

"Actually, this is the tomato sauce you somehow managed to get on the end of the counter." He is annoyed, and when she looks harder, she can see the dark wetness around it where he must have tried to wash it out.

"It's not like I did it on purpose."

"Perhaps you should clean up after yourself."

"I didn't *see* it, Malfoy."

"Then turn on the fucking light," he snaps, flinging a hand toward the light switch and shooting her with a quick glare.

Hermione chews her pasta with narrowed eyes aimed on him. "It's just sauce."

He turns and just *stares* at her, his body set tight and his jaw clenched, as if she can tell all that he wants to reply with through his eyes and body posture. But she does despite her annoyance that he thinks she can, because it *was* just sauce. Which was why he was bothered with it, but not angry enough to bring it up. She had been the one to do so.

She does not know what to say, so she doesn't say anything at all, and turns back to the bowl in front of her. Malfoy's soup can hits the trash bin a little harder than necessary.

Day: 685; Hour: 15

Malfoy leaves the white house after a week and a half that had been filled with the occasional conversation that either ended in annoyance or awkward silence. Hermione had found herself relating to Malfoy in the fact that they both didn't have anyone else to bother with. Not just at the house, but in general. Hermione was alone or with strangers more than she was ever with her friends, and she had figured Malfoy was in the same situation more so than herself. Besides the slight acceptance he had seemed to gain from Moody, she doubted he spoke to anyone else.

Except herself, now. Even that was forced and strange, and usually didn't last more than five exchanged sentences. He kept looking at her as if she was trying to find out how to gut him, and she couldn't exactly blame him. She may have wanted to talk to him because there was no one else, but she had the ulterior motive of finding out where Malfoy sat in life as well. She was a curious girl, and always had been, and Malfoy was something she had been wondering about since she had first seen him in that interrogation room.

Though most of the time they had spent at the house was used up with ignoring one another, or with Hermione searching for common conversation that always

floundered, she is definitely lonelier now with him gone. Not that he provided much in the way of stimulation, but there had been *someone* there at least and that she could recognize.

Two days after he left she would be thankful for a stranger to fill the void.

Day: 695; Hour: 18

Most of the Aurors she encountered were older than her, and usually completely ignored her. They would sit and drink, or stay in their room, or huddle off in corners to whisper about things no one else was allowed to know. The few times she actually attempted to discuss something, even so much as the wallpaper, and she was immediately shutdown.

They acted as if she were trying to glean information out of them or something. She personally thought they were all stuck on themselves and self-importance, and it bothered her to no end. As if they couldn't find something to discuss with her because she wasn't a high level Order member, or because she was so much younger.

Besides the occasional surprise brief conversation over a book or television show, they were mostly lost to her. That was the exact reason why her trunk contained more books than garments. She read each day, all day, for the past week. She woke, she read, she ate, she read, she went to bed, and then repeated the process. Her eyes are tired and itchy by the eighth day, and she finds herself closing them to look at nothing at all for an hour.

It begins to rain, her eyes still shut and the book still open in her hand, and she moves without really thinking of what she is doing. Thunderclaps are loud and startling across the sky, and lighting flashes white in front of the open window. She blames the window for being *open*, and therefore *reminding* her of the memory she had forgotten under piles of her life.

The rain is hard against her tired skin, and ice cold, and by the time she is outside for a single minute, she feels numb. She carries on however, her untied boots sloshing in puddles and mud, until she finds a large oak tree in the middle of the dotted woods. She remembers Malfoy, relaxed and content in a body that had previously always looked as if it were trying to escape its skin, and she leans her shoulder against the trunk.

Her clothes stick to her body, rivers of water cascading down her skin, and her hair weights and plasters itself to her head, face, and neck. She turns her face up,

allowing the droplets to beat down against it. She looks up to the fog, to the skyline, and breathes until she's so lost in nature that she can't find the mind to be lost in anything else.

Day: 701; Hour: 11

Hermione groans as she shoves the door open, tugging her trunk behind her. She thinks she seriously needs to get rid of some of her book load, but she knows she will regret it when she's alone again.

Neville looks up at her from the couch, and she finds Malfoy's gaze lifting up from the coffee table to meet hers as well. Both men are hunched forward over some sort of map, and Malfoy begins to roll it up before he even looks away from her. Hermione breathes out, the breath crackling in her chest, and she sniffs loudly as she kicks the door shut behind her.

"Hey, Hermione."

"Hey," she cracks.

"Sick?"

"Yeah."

"I guess it's going around then." Neville winces.

"No. No, I just got uh… caught in the rain." Hermione waves in an obtuse manner that likely makes him think it was about a mission or some such.

She still isn't sure if the hour of mind-numbing relief was worth the week long cold that doesn't seem to want to go away. She isn't sure what even possessed her to follow Malfoy's unvoiced advice, but she puts it down to temporary insanity. A lot of people got away with that during war, she had heard.

"Is it freezing in here, or is it just me?"

Neville eyes her in her sweater and heavy robe while he sits in a T-shirt and shorts, and gave a small, sympathetic smile that she had never seen anyone pull off better than Neville. "I'll make you some tea. Or cocoa?"

"Mm. Surprise me." Hermione shrugs, and leaves her trunk at the door, throwing herself down onto the loveseat.

"Draco, can I get that blanket behind you?" Hermione's head snaps up, and her snot is nearly allowed to pass the border of her nostrils because she is too surprised to even sniff.

Malfoy pulls the blanket off the back of the recliner and tosses it to the arm of the couch she's on rather than to the patiently waiting Neville. Neville throws her a smile as she slowly pulls the blanket toward herself, eyeing the two of them warily. Since when did Neville start calling Malfoy anything other than... well, Malfoy? She wonders just how long the two had interacted with one another for Malfoy to not even give a look at the sound of his first name coming from the other man.

Neville disappears into the hall as Hermione decides to ask him later. Malfoy turned his attention to the notebook on his lap during her distraction, and she finds him working through the fringe hanging in front of his face as he scribbles something down.

The blanket is warm, though she doesn't know if it's from the house or Malfoy's back, but probably the latter. She cuddles up to it anyway, wrapping it around herself snugly. She doesn't notice the silence, and only manages a few sips of the tea Neville returns with before she is too lazy to keep holding it. She watches through bleary eyes as Malfoy studies his notebook and Neville thinks, and she is lulled to sleep by the soft murmur of their conversation.

When she wakes, it takes her several long moments to realize that it must be a different day. Malfoy sits in the same spot she had last seen him, now in different clothes, as he traces a bright pink line of a highlighter across lines of black on the paper in front of him. She can't see from her distance and the blur of sleep, but she knows the lines are names, because she has seen name sheets in much the same fashion in the meeting rooms.

He sighs, but it is more a movement than a sound, and pushes his hair back from his face. He caps the marker, contemplative as he looks at the list, and then tosses the bright pink tube onto the table. He pulls his feet in, and she realizes that his socks are mismatched, and wonders if he knows this as well.

When she looks back to his face, he is watching her, and Hermione knows how ridiculous it is to close her eyes despite the fact that she does it anyway. Blood rushes up to warm her face, and when she weakly pries her eyelids open again, his expression hasn't changed but for a lifted eyebrow.

"Is that how you hide from the monsters in your closet?"

No, just from the ones on the recliner, she will think to say later. Instead, she blinks, and blinks, and comes out with, "I usually pull the pillows over my head, actually."

He huffs a laugh, seemingly just as surprised with her answer and his own reaction, as she is. "I see your methods are just as effective in all your battles then, Granger."

She takes a moment. "Are you suggesting I hide from everything?"

"No. I'm suggesting you always take the easy way out, even when it isn't going to work."

She glares at him, propping herself up from her balled position. "I don't take the easy way out of anything--"

"No?"

"If I took the easy way out Malfoy, I wouldn't even be here right now."

He stares for a long, pensive moment, before murmuring a reply. "I suppose you're right."

"Furthermore, I don't see where you get off thinking you--"

"Already going at it, then?" Neville appears in the entrance to the hall, waving a tea bag as if it were a white flag. "Hermione?"

She almost doesn't drop it, because she doesn't like to play retreat when it comes to Malfoy, but Neville's face turns grave and tired, and so she does. With a huff and a groggy mumble, she shoves her covers aside, rumpled and a mess as she stands. She can feel Malfoy's eyes on her sleep-ruined and untamed hair, but frankly doesn't care.

She glares at him as she passes, and his eyebrows rise to wrinkle his forehead, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Your socks don't match, by the way."

Perhaps it was childish, or he didn't even care, but she sniffed and raised a haughty nose to him anyway.

"I don't think you'll ever stop fighting with him," Neville tells her, later, when they are seated and she has woken up more. "No matter what. You're not in

different Houses, you're not on different sides, but you'll always still fight."

"It doesn't mean we aren't different people. I don't care if Malfoy comes up with every battle winning strategy and starts a foundation to free the house-elves, because there will always be a part of him that will be that arrogant git, and there will always be the part of me who will never forget it."

Neville laughs, and stares down at his tea, and she knows he thinks he is going to say something she won't like before he even speaks. "He's not that bad, Hermione. He's still *Malfoy*, but... older. More mature. Less dangerous, and cruel. I don't know..."

"I don't know why he's here. I've figured out that it's not for any nefarious reasons, and I know he's become an important part to this war somehow. So maybe he doesn't believe in genocide. Does that make him a good person? I don't think so. I don't *know* him."

"He's different. He's more... withdrawn or something. But that could be where he is. I don't know. He's just different."

"He is. But how much?"

Neville shrugs and finally meets her eyes. "Enough, maybe."

Hermione shoves her hair back and sighs. "I know he doesn't hold the same beliefs. I know he's a good strategist. I know he basically gave up all he knew just to be here. But I also know he's still arrogant, he's still mean, he's still angry, and he's still a prat. He still *says* things just to piss me off, and he still does things that tell me he thinks he's better somehow. Especially at fighting. Well, only that, really, that I've had to deal with so far."

"He is pretty good at that." Neville shrugs again. "I'm not saying he's a good person--"

"He could still be a *bad* person."

"But given the fact that there has been change, I've seen enough to make me willing to give him a shot at seeing just how far the change goes. He's not the best person in the world, but neither are you and neither am I. He saved my life, Hermione. *Twice.* I'm not going to shut down the possibility of him being an all right bloke, while thinking him a bastard after he did that for me. I can't."

Hermione nods, staring down at the table though all she sees is the rapidly shrinking figure of Malfoy standing with her blood all over his skin and clothes. "He's still a prat."

"He'll *always* be a prat."

Day: 707; Hour: 20

"I think I see you more than I see anyone else."

He probably doesn't know how to respond to this, and that is why he doesn't.

"If you could have one thing in life, what it would be?"

He doesn't answer this at first either, but when he looks up from that notebook she now always sees him with, she thinks he realizes she is going to keep bothering him. He sighs heavily, as if she were a child asking him to turn back time.

"Absolute power." He continues writing, not even sparing her a glance.

Hermione frowns at him, because she has been trying to think of him as Changed Malfoy, and this seems very much like just a Malfoy answer. "Absolute power corr--"

"Upts absolutely. Yes, I know."

"Well, I'm not surprised."

He looks at her then, briefly, and looks superbly annoyed. "And why is that?"

"You've always been on a power trip and looking for more of it." She is honest.

He drops the pretense of the notebook and looks up at her from under his hair and eyelashes, and his forehead wrinkles down. "I suppose you recognize that trait in me, because you know it in yourself."

"Excuse me?"

He exhales hard through his nose and closes the notebook, raising his head to look at her fully. "What do you want out of life, Granger?"

"That's not relevant--"

"It's completely relevant. I answered your question when I didn't want to, now I expect you to do the same."

"I don't care what you *expect*."

"That's mature."

She glares until her eyes hurt. "I want us to win the war."

"And then?"

She shakes her head with a shrug, searching for the answer in the carpet for a moment. "I don't know. Peace. To finish my last year. To get into a good university. To become a healer, or get a position in the Ministry, maybe. Or maybe I'll be a teacher."

"So, I suppose you'll be able to achieve these things without any power?"

"What?" It seems quite inadequate, her reply, and she knows this.

"You need power to win a war. You need power to maintain peace. You need to find some power within yourself to complete your last year after all of this, and power in your accomplishments to get into a good school. You need power to heal people, or make headway at the Ministry, or to teach people. You--"

"You're twisting my words aro--"

"*You* twisted *mine*. I suppose you thought I meant world domination, or what? Pureblood supremacy, perhaps, or to become the new bloody King of England. I want the *power* to do the things I want to finally finish this bloody war and to move on with my life. *You're* the one who perceived it to be in a negative aspect, without any indication to what I might want to achieve with that power."

Hermione stares at him and flounders. "Well, the way you said it--"

"Bullocks. *Everything* needs power in order to work--"

"Well, what am I supposed to think! You may be *here*, Malfoy, but I don't know *why.* It's not too hard to look at you and see the same person who called me Mudblood and who tried to kill my Headmaster. What *should* I think?" She yells this loud enough for the entire house to hear if anyone else was even there.

His face is set in grim lines, his mouth tight, and the veins on his neck let her know he is seething. "I don't give a *fuck* what you think."

"Why are you here?" He stands, ignoring her as he turns for the door, and so she asks again, and then again, until she is yelling it at his back.

He turns suddenly, so fast she thinks he must have almost lost his balance, and the chords in his neck stand up sharply against the heated red skin when he screams. "Why the fuck do you think I'm here!"

He hasn't meant it to be a question given the way he doesn't wait for a response, but she is on her feet now too, and following after him. "Why should I believe you mean things in a good way, when all I've ever seen from you, is you meaning those same things in a bad way? I--"

"Yes, I'm a right bastard, Granger, aren't I? Volunteering for war, spending days coming up with plans and strategies, and bailing *your* pathetic asses out of bad situations. I guess this makes me a *bad* person."

"Don't act like you're some angel--"

He turns from his fast pace down the hall, just to start it back up immediately, but now toward *her* rather than the bedroom. "No, you're right. I grew up with all this racism caught up around my heart, and I *hated* you for what you were, and what you did despite it. And even now, after I've changed my ways, it doesn't matter what I do, because I'm still the man who came from that boy, aren't I? And I'm a murderer, of course. Of course. Let us not forget that."

"Just because you've made some changes, it doesn't just mean--"

"You're a hypocrite! Don't *act* like your hands aren't just as filthy as mine!" He bent his head until she felt his breath on her forehead, his face sinister. "I guess we're *both* dirty, Granger."

"I do what I *have* to!" It came out thick and a little strangled, but she has never spoken to anyone about what she has had to do, just as they never do to her.

"We *all* do in the end, don't we?" He waits as she shakes her head at him, disgust on her features for him and *herself.* "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to apologize for hurting your feelings in fucking school, like there isn't bigger shit to worry about? Because I'm not going to. I don't know what you fucking people *want* from me, but this is all I'm giving. If you're not satisfied, *fuck off.*"

This time, she lets him walk away.

Day: 708; Hour: 7

Perhaps Malfoy did always do what he had to do. He was racist because that was what he was, and there is no excuse for that. It didn't matter if that was what he had been taught, because in the end, it was what he had practiced himself. He had let the Death Eaters in that night, and almost killed Dumbledore, because it was what he had to do. He had come to the Order because it was what he felt he had to do.

To repent? If so, to himself or to everyone else? For revenge?

And Hermione, as she lay in her bed, thinks that maybe it doesn't matter. The point is that he was there, now, fighting for them -- and doing a good job of it at that. The point was that he had lost all of his old life to start all over by risking his new one nearly every day, and that that was the biggest apology she was going to get from him. Perhaps it didn't matter that there was a part of her that would always be angry with Draco Malfoy, because there was the rest of her that had to be busy being angry with the real enemies. The ones who hadn't begun to seek redemption.

When does redemption begin? She likes to believe it is at the top of a tower, when a boy lowers his wand, his power, his control, his future in the ranks he had been promised and walks away to never be the same again.

The question for Draco Malfoy, of course, was when it ended.

Day: 713; Hour: 10

She receives two letters at the same time, both from Ron, though there are three paragraphs at the end of the second from Harry. They are getting closer, she knows. The first letter is brief, though comically details a bad-cooking experience that left Hermione gasping for air, but the second letter reeks of enthusiasm. Ron even gave an exclamation point to the 'Hey Hermione' that introduced the rest of the letter.

She searches for clues to support her theory in the faces of the people around her, but they are war worn and show nothing. It does not dampen her own spirit, however, and Ernie can only laugh at her when she smiles like a fool for days following.

Five

Day: 720; Hour: 2

Hermione is chosen for the simple missions, and she knows this with both annoyance and relief. She also knows it has something to do with Malfoy, as she has learned he drafts most of the choices for each mission. Knowing this, she figures he probably wouldn't even put her in any if it weren't for the fact that they needed to give some of the more skilled individuals some breaks.

Not that she hadn't improved, because she had. It had been extremely hard at first. When it was just her and a few others against a small group, she could handle herself very well. Her knowledge of magic is vast, she moved quickly enough, and she was always brave to boot.

It was the big battles that did her in. When the air would be heavy with magic and smoke from wands, and when she couldn't get a clear vision or know who was on which side she became wary. There was confusion and panic in the air, and inside of her, and her mind would become frazzled and she would lose her cool. It wasn't something she was proud of, but something she admitted to herself was a problem. Her improvement was there, but it wasn't at the point yet where she was no longer a risk to herself or the people around her.

So, she gets the smaller jobs now. Which suits her fine, because she's still involved and does her part, and she does it well. She is bitter with herself more so than anyone else because she is not as good as she wants to be, but at least she is doing what she can.

Day: 728; Hour: 4

There is a brushing against her side that hadn't been there a few seconds ago and when she moves to further herself from the person, they follow. Malfoy doesn't look at her when she turns her attention toward him, and she can hardly make out more than his nose and mouth around the hood of the sweatshirt, but she knows him anyway.

She opens her mouth to question why he seems to be following her on her trek back through Muggle England, but he nods his head to the side and pushes into her as he turns. She is confused but turns with him as they head off down a small side street, and then into an alley. Malfoy pauses when they are sufficiently away from

prying eyes, and pulls a large manila envelope out of his zipped up jacket. He nods toward her, casting another glance around before returning his eyes to hers.

Hermione fingers the corner of the envelope, fidgeting. "What is the one thing you want out of life?"

He scowls, but she thinks he had known she would ask him *something* to make sure it was truly him. The question may not be the right one considering the continuous clenching of his jaw now, but he answers her anyway. "Absolute power."

She nods, pulling the envelope out and offering hers. "Me too."

His eyes flash up from her hand and its contents, and she hopes he knows that is the closest he will get to an apology for that conversation. He takes the envelope and offers his, which she accepts after a moment. She tucks it away, clearing her throat to break the silence over emotions that she cannot define between the two of them. His eyes are still steady on hers, and she has to look away to bring back any semblance of normalcy.

He is the first to walk away, and she follows him out. They walk all the way back to the small building that serves as an entrance to the wizarding world without a word, and though it is awkward at first, she forgets that it is supposed to be a few minutes in.

Day: 730; Hour: 2

She tries to remember the exact bunch of numbers, because she does not feel she can pay the proper respects to time and war without knowing *exactly* when it began. She does know that it has been two years now though, beginning three hours ago or at this moment. She feels the pull of time, of war, but somehow it seems as if it has been longer and shorter at the same time.

Sometimes, when she closes her eyes and drowns out the world (which is a very hard thing for Hermione Granger to do when not buried in a book), she can see, and smell, and feel the beating of air and the stench of smoke. She can remember in vivid detail how she got to this point. But most days, she cannot remember beyond yesterday, because war is a tornado and she is just watching the eye turn.

Two years, she thinks; feels it like heavy lead coating along her bones. *Two years*.

Day: 741; Hour: 12

"Granger." Hermione looks up at Neville and frowns until she sees Malfoy walk over to the couch opposite her.

"Malfoy."

Neville smiles at her when she gives him an apprehensive look, because he probably knows why it is Malfoy has taken to addressing her. The blond pulls a scroll from a small chest he placed on the table, and his fingers are careful as he unrolls it on the surface. Runes in old, brown-turned ink are slowly revealed with the turns of his fingers, the parchment brittle as he lays stones on the edges.

"What is this?"

"How do you feel about puzzles?" He looks up then, seeming to analyze her.

She scans him as well, trying to tell what exactly he wants from her. "I like them."

"Good."

Hermione looks back to the parchment. "This is the rune for peace, though it's inverted. The Romans referred to it as corruption, or riots. The one next to it is for…a graph. Or a tablet." She glances up at him, then back to the scroll. "This line here symbolizes the importance of it. A riot over a specific doctrine?"

"It's jumbled. Some of them we were able to understand, but others…this one, for example," his fingertip hovers over one at the end of the first row, tracing it through the air. "There are three different meanings for what it could be. We have to solve all of them, arrange them, and then try to figure out their meaning through placement."

Hermione releases a breath, her eyebrows furrowing in concentration. "Here, let me…just…"

She stands, making her way around the table, and Malfoy moves to the other end of the couch so she can sit. He hands her the notebook he's been carrying around with him for months, already flipped to a blank page in the back so she can't glimpse what else it contains. Neville supplies her the pen over her shoulder.

"This one is for…place."

"Yes, but I've seen this before. Do you see this curve off the top line? I believe

that means something akin to 'at here', as the Latin used. It represents a specific *place* rather than abstract placement or general areas."

Hermione nods, scribbling down their observations. "The short line at the bottom means it's grounded, perhaps in a literal sense of the word. It--"

"Or it's home-based." She looks up at him and he leans forward again. "Look over here, in the rune of home, then again in the one for family. The line represents familiarity."

"But what about here? In friends? There's no line."

"Perhaps they weren't familiar with the 'friends' or 'allies' who are involved. Or, maybe, they thought they were, but were proved wrong."

"You're making guesses before you know the story."

"And that's why I came to you."

She meets his eyes, and feels the tips of her ears heat up, though she isn't sure why. It is almost a compliment, and she is unsure how to take it.

"Alright. Let's see then."

Day: 754; Hour: 14

It takes her almost two weeks to finish the scroll, and Neville is the one she hands it to. She has been hoping it would be Malfoy, just to see what he thought of what she came up with. She had never known he was as skilled in runes as he was.

"You work with him a lot, don't you?"

Neville shrugged. "I think everyone works with him a lot."

"He's not mean to you, though, is he?" She blinks at herself, because she notices she sounds like a worried mother.

Neville laughs, because he notices as well. "He jokes sometimes. Tells me not to blow anything up. But it's more...joking than being mean. For both our benefits rather than his."

"Hmm."

"Still don't think he's changed, huh?"

She waves the scroll before handing it to him. "I like puzzles."

Day: 761; Hour: 21

She sees no one for a week, only passing shadows of strangers for two, and then suddenly almost all her friends at the same place. Two days pass before she thinks she is losing her mind.

"Fred!" she screams from the top of the stairs, and Seamus stops to gawk at her.

"Why, that is a *lovely* shade of orange, Hermione." The redhead turns the corner and smiles at her.

"You!" she seethes, pointing.

"Me? Wrong twin, love. Must have been George, or someone else in the house."

"George left three *days* ago."

"That is George actually." Seamus cackles behind his hand.

Hermione practically stumbles down the steps and George is wise enough to turn and run in the other direction. Her bright orange hair flies up in her sprint toward him, and she doesn't know how he manages to outrun her while he's laughing the entire time. She's already out of breath just two minutes in.

"I'm going to kill you!"

"It wears off!"

"When!"

"A few weeks maybe? A year at the most." He tosses her a smile and she growls, lobbing a stick at him across the expanse of the yard.

"You have to come back sometime!"

But later, when she is already asleep and her hair has been washed thirteen times, he leaves in the middle of the night for his next mission. In the morning, she is more bothered that she hasn't had the chance to say goodbye rather than not

having been able to get her revenge.

Day: 763; Hour: 13

Malfoy raises his eyebrows, halting, and almost keeps himself composed before bursting into laughter. Hermione glowers and stalks away. If it wasn't his birthday, she would have hexed him.

Day: 777; Hour: 12

"You look like a Weasley." A sneer twists his face briefly, and then it is gone. Her heart lurches a little, because it reminds her of Ron, and she misses him terribly.

The orange has begun to wash out of her hair, though it has taken weeks to do so, and he is right. The dye stained her hair orange and red, and left her looking as if she decided to do a bad job of making herself a redhead one night.

"Thank you." Because she knows there is nothing else she could say that would goad him more.

He gives her a look and pulls himself up on the table behind him. "I suppose you wanted to discuss something, Granger?"

"I don't think you should send Lavender on this mission."

He arches an eyebrow, looking classically bored and arrogant. "And why is that?"

"She's off. I don't know what happened to her yet, but she's depressed. She mopes about, she's not eating, and she's chain smoking."

"It's a war," he drawls. "I don't know who isn't depressed or stressed out. You hardly eat either -- should I not send you out? And Patil was passed out on the table when I walked in, so I shouldn't send her. Goldstein twitches when he's nervous, and that could cause bad aim, so I suppose--"

"Malfoy. Just...give her a break -- all right? She's not thinking clearly, and I think it's a very bad idea. She just needs a little time. I'll talk to her and try to sort it out, but she won't be at her best tomorrow-"

"She doesn't need to be at her best. It's a simple mission. There likely won't even be any opposition."

Hermione can feel her annoyance kick in harder at her ribs, her hands balling under the table. "I'm asking you nicely."

"I can see that."

Hermione snorts and stands. "My apologies then, Malfoy. I nearly forgot you don't give a damn about anything but yourself."

She exits the room without bothering to look at him again.

Day: 778; Hour: 18

Lavender does not make an appearance on the porch and Hermione is ready to go wake her, just as a breath fans itself across her ear. She's aware of strands of soft hair brushing against her ear and cheek, and a source of warmth close to her back. She has a feeling who it is before he even speaks.

"The fact that I make sure I create plans that fit with everyone's abilities that I choose for their missions, and that I'm *here at all,* must mean I don't give a damn about anyone but myself. I suppose you're right then, Granger?"

She blinks and blinks at the backs of her friends out in front of the house as they converse in distant morning voices, lit only by the dull grey of dawn. She doesn't know what to say, because there is a part of her that knows she might have been wrong even before Lavender's apparent dismissal from the mission; yet there is also a part of her that still thinks he only did it to prove her wrong, and wouldn't have otherwise.

"No answer then? Right. I forgot you can't hear the question all the way up on that high horse of yours."

He moves around her, stiff, as he descends down the stairs to join the rest of the team, and it takes her several moments to remember she has legs that must move.

Day: 780; Hour: 7

Hermione hates how she is always the one who seems to come off as being judgmental, rather than Malfoy, whom she always judges because *he* has always been the judgmental one. This realization has brought her to the idea that perhaps she is now the one who judges too much. Malfoy is an ass. But she can no longer blame that on his prejudice, no more than she can blame Ron's tendencies for being one, as his. Because in both cases, she can't find it.

She resolves to look at Malfoy now as a person she does not know, and has never known. This way, she thinks, she can stop putting her foot in her mouth. She does not like to be the one who comes off as the mean one, or the cruel person.

She hates that she has lowered herself to the position, no matter who the other person happens to be. She is better than that, she knows, and perhaps it is time to act like it.

But, *God*, he is infuriating.

Day: 783; Hour: 12

"What about you, Hermione? Have you ever been in love?"

Hermione gives a small smile to the black and white film playing out on the screen in front of her and Tonks, and shakes her head. "No, not yet."

"You will." Hermione, sometimes when she was away from the pull of the world, would sit and wonder if that was true.

Not everyone fell in love, after all. She is officially out of her teens, and yet here she is, a young woman who has never been in love, or even lost her virginity. She always believed that the two must coincide, but the fact that she was older and still without both did not seem as all right as it had when she was still a girl in a dormitory at Hogwarts. She knows she is young, but the fact that everyone around her seems to have achieved at least one, if not both, of these milestones, it makes her feel as if she is running too far behind.

"I thought you were in love with Ron." Tonks smiles at the screen, and Hermione glances at her.

She takes awhile to respond, and it is both with regret and acceptance. "I thought, for a very long time, that I could have been. But that's over now."

"Because of the war?"

"Because of a lot of things. But mostly because we don't fit right, and I would rather keep our friendship then bother trying to change us both to make it work, and just have it end badly. I think some things just aren't supposed to happen, no matter how much you want them to."

"And sometimes they do, no matter how much you *don't* want them to." She

sounds as if it is her own revelation about her own life, so Hermione only nods and folds her hands in her lap.

Life has a horrible way of surprising you.

Day: 789; Hour: 20

Malfoy is seated on the couch when she returns from her second attempt to fall asleep. A bowl of popcorn is settled haphazardly between his knees as he studies the remote control. It's dark except for the changing colors from the television. Lavender's voice rises from the bedroom she is in, moaning loudly, and Hermione blushes despite the fact that Malfoy is not even aware of her presence.

Lavender's depression had been caused from a break with her lover, who she happened to claim she was in too deep of lust with to be able to function without. Hermione is of the opinion that Lavender simply loves the scruffy man who appears from her bedroom at random times, but doesn't want anyone to know. Their reconciliation has been going on intermittently for hours now. Hermione had attempted to drown them out with the television, but she was left staring pitifully at her ceiling as Lavender's cries rose above the booming volume of a bad fight scene.

"You're up?" she asks, so he knows she is there, because she has heard a rumor that Seamus snuck up behind him and Malfoy sent him slamming into a wall on instinct.

He jumps anyway, and clutches the popcorn bowl that almost topples with the movement. He mutters a curse, fixing the bowl before glancing up at her.

"Between the obnoxious shagging and the blasting of the television, I would have had to be dead not to be."

But she does not believe him, because there is a look in his eyes that she hasn't seen since Ron came home from his first mission and holed himself up in his room. It is a stunned sort of horror there. And with the odd pallor of his skin, the smudges from lack of sleep, and the glaze over his eyes, she thinks he looks haunted. She very much doubts Malfoy has trouble sleeping due to being too uncomfortable to hear someone having sex.

"What are you watching?"

His lips twitch, and there is a ghost of a smile. "The methods of safe sex."

Hermione blushes fiercely, and squirms in the seat she has taken on the recliner. "Oh."

"Muggles are quite inventive. Though I'm unsure how I feel about that rubber contraption."

Oh, my God, she moans in her head, and rubs at her face like it will help with the heat of it at all. He hits a button on the remote multiple times, and her voice is rushed and high when she tries to change the subject.

"The remote won't work?"

"No, it does. I just like to push the buttons that don't do anything."

She purses her lips at him and thrusts her hand out. "Let me see it."

"No." He pulls it closer to him, as if she has extendable arms and can reach him from her position. Typical male, then.

She sighs. "Try taking the batteries out and switching their positions."

He blinks down at the black plastic in his hand, and then back up at the television. "I would rather watch this anyway."

She knows he has no idea what she's talking about, or if he does know what batteries are, he certainly doesn't know how to locate them. He obviously wanted to watch the current program more than he wanted to show her he didn't know something.

"Just let me see."

"I said, no."

"Well, I'm not watching this."

He looks at her as if she is entirely too slow for him to talk to. "No one said you had to."

"Well since we both have to deal with...that, then we should find something we *both* want to watch."

"You're not in a position to compromise, I believe." She glares and he smirks,

leaning forward slightly. "Does it make you uncomfortable?"

She flames. "It's not interesting, nor is it anything I don't already know. So--"

She stops when he grins wickedly, and turns even redder after he speaks. "Oh, so you're well-educated in safe Muggle sex, are you?"

She catches herself before she makes a fool of herself by stomping away, and instead moves to the television set, waiting to respond until she's facing away from him. "That is *none* of your business."

"I-- Hey, turn that back."

"No," she grumbles, jabbing the button to change the channel.

She waits until she lands on what seems a fitting enough movie, actors dressed in Victorian style clothing as the women titter at passing men. She holds her nose up all the way back to her seat. Malfoy glares at her and gives a refined snort, hitting the buttons on the remote again.

"I suppose we'll watch this."

"Or I could simply get up and change it, but then I suppose I would lower myself to your childish standing."

It is her turn to glare. "Childish, was watching something that I obviously did not want to watch."

"Childish self-importance is believing that one can come and change what a person has been watching for half an hour already, just because they don't *want* to watch it."

"Childish is not wanting to *share*, when--"

"Or, it's this conversation." He turns to look at her, eyebrow raised, and looking as arrogant as ever. Except for his mismatched socks that she noticed on her way back to her seat, or his butter covered fingertips as he pulls out another piece of popcorn.

Hermione huffs, though regrets it when she remembers how immature she thought all his huffing was when she was flipping the channels. She turns back to the screen and ignores him, trying to concentrate on the woman being charmed by a

relatively good-looking man.

There are long, blissful minutes of silence where there is nothing from Lavender's room, or anything from the man seated five feet from her. Hermione becomes so caught up in the movie that she actually jumps when Malfoy speaks up.

"He's a ponce."

"What?"

"That's the problem with these cinema pictures. What man has ever acted like that? Quoting poetry, waxing on about her bloody hands for five minutes. I am completely unaware how you can stomach this, let alone believe it enough to watch it."

"There are some men…" She trails off at the look he gives her. "Well, perhaps some woman want to believe that there are men out there like that."

He looks disgusted, wrinkling his nose. "*Why?* Do you honestly mean to tell me that you would enjoy…that?"

He nods toward the television, where the man is gesturing wildly and going on a poetry rampage. Hermione watches for a moment, another, and then *giggles*. And she does not think she has done such a thing since she was five.

"Maybe not." He makes a sound that lets her know he knew he was right the whole time. "But I would appreciate it all the same. It's sweet."

"It's nauseating. And then you feed women these images, and they get *ideas* in their heads, even when no man acts like that. You're only all setting yourselves up for disappointment."

"Sometimes it's just nice to pretend, Malfoy."

"I would rather keep my dinner from making another appearance."

"It's not *that* bad."

"You can't tell me you actually get off on this romantic drivel? It's bullshit."

"It's a little ridiculous, but at least it's better than your previous show."

He looks at her as if he had just overheard her tell someone a dirty secret. "Are you a...a closet *romantic*, Granger? Skip the sex for the poetry, hmm?"

She blushes hotly, which counts as being far too often this evening. "I am not a *romantic*. I'm a practical person, and love is not practical."

He still looks at her like he has busted her, and his smirk is absolutely devious when he turns back to the television. He is quiet for three seconds, and then snorts, looking at her. "He just compared her hair to dirt."

"He said she was as beautiful as nature, with her hair...like..."

"Like dirt."

Hermione laughs outright.

Day: 796; Hour: 22

The building is made of chipped stone, rising up two stories with broken towers and half the roof collapsed. Dark, angry vines twist paths up the length of it, and the wind howls through the branches of dead trees that are scattered across the barren landscape.

"It's creepy," Dean whispers.

"I think it's beautiful, in a gothic fashion," Hermione whispers back, and Dean gives her a strange look.

"Pay her no mind, Thomas. She obviously looks at things through a *romanticized* scope," he pauses to accept her mandatory glare in his direction before continuing. "Give in to how much the appearance puts you on guard, because you're going to have to be. There could be anything inside, and all of you would do well to remember it."

The end of the broom slung over Malfoy's shoulder comes closer to hitting her in the face, and she has to step aside to avoid it. The move sends Dean sideways as well, and his foot cracks a branch loudly. Malfoy stops and spins, holding up a hand to signal the rest of them to, and gives *her* his angry expression.

He looks back over his shoulder at the building, as if there could possibly be anyone inside of it, and then gives her another look before gesturing for them to continue. She is already angry with him, so the apparent blame doesn't push him

any further into the clear when it comes to the heaviness of her look.

He hadn't informed them until that night that there would be some level of flying involved, and when she told him that he hadn't said there would be at the meeting, he simply told her that he was *then* and that it didn't matter. Malfoy would never stop being a pompous git as far as she saw.

He stops them at the side of the building, and instructs them to fly up to the busted out window one at a time. Hermione grows progressively nervous the longer she stands there.

"I don't fly."

He growls, because he probably knew this was going to happen. "Did you take the basic flying lessons at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, but--"

"Then you know well enough."

"I'll fly you up." Neville offers after Malfoy has flown up himself, and lays a gentle hand on her shoulder, as he *knows* how much she hates it.

Yet she still declines his offer, despite the easy way out. Malfoy will likely think her a coward or incapable if she had accepted, and though she may have been like him in the fact that they didn't like people to see when they couldn't do something, she wasn't about to have him show her up.

It takes her three commands to get the broom to even come up from the ground, and it sways uneasily under her nerves. She hovers up slowly, the broom jolting and moving enough like a seesaw to make her nauseous. Her heartbeat speeds up once she comes to a stop in front of the window. She doesn't dare step onto the windowpane like Malfoy had done, and she also doesn't trust herself not to slam into the edges.

She puts too much pressure on the broom as she leans forward, anxiety and lack of experience catching up to her. Malfoy, waiting like a statue at the side, has to grab the broom before she jets into the wall at the other side of the room. It sends her whipping around, and she glimpses the stern frown on Malfoy's face before she tips over, hanging upside down on the broom.

Hermione exhales a loud breath, embarrassed and shocked and turns darker at

Anthony's sniggering at her side. She clutches the broom frantically, trying not to make a sound, and suddenly is spun back upwards. It takes her head a moment to catch up and settle on the growing smirk on Malfoy's face, but she's too unnerved to be angry over it. He laughs silently, his shoulders shaking, and gestures for her to get off as he holds the broom still.

She uses his shoulder as leverage to not further embarrass herself and fall with her wobbly knees. She thinks the touch may shut him up, and though it works, he is not angry as she expected. His face is carefully blank as he looks at her, and he holds still and hard under her palm until she drops it away.

Day: 804; Hour: 5

She hears news down the wires of the Order that Malfoy and Tonks were injured badly at an abandoned church in Glasgow. She convinces Lupin to let her leave her delivery post at the dreaded white house, for Grimmauld. Tonks is on the mend; though out for a few days for the breaks in her fingers to heal. Hermione follows her from the living room into the infirmary, and Tonks does not say anything when she catches her looking toward Malfoy's bed several times during the conversation.

"He broke his ribs. Fell from a beam he was running across when they found out he was above them. Got a nasty cut from the glass on the floor too."

"Well, at least he's not dead. We would have been short a good strategist."

But it is something more than that, because Hermione realizes that perhaps she would care a bit more if Malfoy were to have died. Tonks seems to know this too, because she does not answer, but Malfoy does.

"I'm glad to see you've come to think of me so highly." She starts, thinking he had been asleep, as his body had given all indication that he had been.

"At least it's improvement. A year ago she would have glared at your corpse." Tonks offers, he snorts, and she wonders if that fact could make her a bad person.

He reaches down, running a fingertip along the scar she can see edge out from the bottom of his shirt. "Longbottom did a fantastic job of marring me."

"He did. I was quite proud of him." Tonks smiles, and Hermione rushes to defense.

"At least he healed you at all." It comes out harsher than it should have, and it is

very silent for a gaping second.

"I know," he whispers, dropping his hand away.

Hermione looks back to Tonks who winks. "I don't think he's stopped complaining since he woke up yesterday."

"If Draco Malfoy didn't complain about things," Hermione whispers back, "I think the world truly would stop turning from the shock of it."

"I like him surly, myself. Not as much talking. They start pumping him with potions, and he gets *chatty*."

"I can still *hear* you, you know."

Day: 811; Hour: 6

She has gotten to used to simple missions. She knows this in the way that she knows she cannot feel her legs, and that there is too much blood in her head. Her surroundings tilt, and spin, and she stumbles. The building behind her is soaked with fire, raging across the entire structure. It lights the night in orange and shadows, and there is ash on her tongue that clogs up her mouth.

There is screaming, hoarse and full of so much fear that it makes her want to cry, and she finds Anthony Goldstein as a sinking yellow figure in the mud. He bows his head to God, or death, or something so much bigger than anything around him. She quickly raises her wand at the Death Eater grinning behind his mask of bone, and it does not shake, not at all.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" The grin is frozen, malicious and dead, and the body accompanying it drops to knees and then falls face first.

Hermione does not feel as if she has saved a life, but is weighted with all the knowledge of having taken one. And though it is not hard to kill a person, she has found, it is harder to have someone else know you have. He will look at her different she thinks, the way she did when she looked up from the ground after Malfoy killed that Death Eater. Or at Seamus. Or Neville. Or Angelina. Or absolutely anyone else. There is a tint to death, and it covers them like shadows.

But Anthony does not look at her, collapsed and shaking, and she finds the answers in the body near the fallen Death Eater's. Padma's locks of black hair float like dancing strands in the wind of smoke and ash, and Hermione's heart knows

before she does.

Day: 811; Hour: 12

Hermione does not expect to see him standing with Lupin in the kitchen when she drags her feet across the doorway to find the nearest place to collapse. When she does, she moves without acknowledging, and she forgets the tired in the marrow of her bones or the dull and heavy weight inside her chest.

She must look a fright, but she thinks of this only later, when she eyes her reflection in the mirror of the bathroom, and only sees black ash and sorrow brimmed eyes. He just stands there, even when she is charging at him, but he moves when she shoves her hands against his chest and sends him flying into the counter's edge.

"Hermione--" Lupin gasps, and moves, but Malfoy uncurls his long fingers from the expanse of his palm and halts him.

"You *bastard*!" She yells, and shoves him again, again, again. It doesn't affect him, and so she balls her own fingers, sending knuckles to the curves of his body. "I fucking hate you! I fucking hate you *so fucking much*!"

He grabs for her flying hands, and she opens one, smacking her palm into his mouth, his jaw, cheek, the side of his head. There is a struggle, and she loses sight of what she does, but she knows she is clobbering his head and anything she can reach. When he finally grabs her arms, she uses her feet. Her voice is shrill and phlegm-filled, but she doesn't know she is sobbing all the words she is screaming.

"You knew! You *fuck*! You *knew* she couldn't handle it! That she couldn't...couldn't *be there*. And you didn't give a fuck! You did it anyway, you fucking, God-damned piece of shit!" And she screams, and it's broken and loose, and most makes no sense, but she doesn't care.

She doesn't care, because there is a rage inside of her that swelters up along her skin, until she is ready to explode with it. It is the most terrible emotion she has ever felt, and later, she will never remember another time in her life where she felt as out of control as she did then.

Malfoy has grabbed her and turned them, and she finds herself pressing hard against the counter until the edge feels like it might break her spinal chord. His thighs are holding hers still as he keeps them tight together, his fingers wrapped around her wrists and holding her arms up to each shoulder. She digs her nails into

his clothes, but it's not enough, and she yanks them to cover her ears when her own scream breaks cracked from the muscles in her throat.

She closes her eyes to the furious face hovering in front of hers, and the blood dripping from his lip. She unclenched her fingers, grasping at him as her bent head hits the hollow of his throat, and she sobs unabashed into the laundry soap scent of his clothes. There is a tearing pain inside of her that is so much bigger than herself, that she feels nothing but that, and all she can think about is Padma, all the others along the way, and the way she misses Harry, Ron, her parents, and how much she hates her life.

Malfoy relaxes marginally, just enough to where she can breathe between him and the countertop, but she still feels both. He pulls her hands from his shoulders and slides to the side against her.

"It wasn't me," he whispers, and then there is a different set of arms, and she only takes a second to throw her arms around Lupin's neck as Malfoy's body disappears.

"Alright. Alright, come on."

"Padma."

He exhales heavily onto the top of her head as he guides her out of the kitchen, and pushes a curse out with his breath. "Do you want to shower, or go to bed?"

"I don't *care*." And bed it was.

Day: 814; Hour: 17

Hermione doesn't emerge from her bedroom for two days. It is depression on the first, and the second is more sadness and shame. She would never know what came over, but it scares and shocks her probably as much as it did Malfoy and Lupin. She hadn't known there was so much emotion boiled up inside the lines of her veins until it all split out at once.

She had *attacked* him. Which she doesn't feel absolutely horrible over, considering he had done it to her in the past, but it isn't in her character. And it had been the wrong person. She had been so quick to blame someone else, and there he had been. The one she had *thought* planned the mission and picked the members for it.

She would miss Padma's funeral. She had asked Lupin yesterday, and he had told

her it would be a small affair and only a handful of people could go. He has asked if she wanted him to put a request in, but she refused on the grounds that the few who were picked should be people close to her. She knew Padma, but only just, and she did not feel right about the idea of taking someone else's spot that knew and loved her.

By the late afternoon of the third day, when Lupin does not leave any food for her outside her door, or knocks to ask to come in, she knows he must have left like he had said. She exits her bedroom to the smell of something cooking in the kitchen, and knows Malfoy had remained behind. She comes close to changing her mind, but keeps her feet on route to the kitchen.

He doesn't look at her as he sits at the table; the light lit on the stove letting her know something is in the oven. She searches through the line of cabinets for something to eat; she hasn't been to this specific house yet, and knows where nothing is. She thinks that perhaps he might tell her because he must know what she is looking for, but he doesn't speak a word.

She finds hot chocolate packets in the cabinet next to the fridge, and settles on that instead of food. She opens them to find the powder stuck together in a paper thin wad at the bottom, but still leans them up against the toaster and puts the water on. She is content to keep her back to him at first, but then decides that if she wants to get it over with, she should face up to any possible fallout now.

He still isn't looking at her when she turns around, though she can swear she had thought his eyes had been attached to her back when she faced away. He is sprawled out on the chair, and looks too large to fit on it. His legs are long and stretch out in front of him, one arm laying on the table and the other on his lap. His head is turned slightly away from her, eyes trained on the table. There is a red groove in the fullness of his bottom lip, and it is from her. She feels guilt like something sticky on the tissue of her throat.

He looks up at her with all the knowledge on his face that she will be looking back at him, and she swallows tightly at the blank look that doesn't even contain recognition.

"I shouldn't have blamed you."

He slides the arm on the table back, and reaches blindly for the bright red mug that had been sitting in the bend of his elbow. He grasps it and brings it to his mouth, and his voice is even and dull. "No."

He takes a sip from the mug and finally looks away from her, pressing his lips together as he sets it back down on the table. "I was...distraught."

"To say the least."

"I'm surprised you didn't hit me." This is honesty, though she hasn't meant to say it.

"Have I ever?" He looks back up at her then, his head still bent.

"Well, basically." Hermione flusters.

"I've gotten rough with you Granger, but I don't believe I've ever *hit* you."

Hermione stares back at him in silence, the truth of it swallowing her up a little. "You almost have."

His lips twitch. "More times than you likely know. I believe you're the most infuriating woman I've ever had to know."

"That's close enough, though."

"Is it?"

"Yes. And you're the most infuriating person I've ever known as well, so...we're even on that accord." He is quiet. "Perhaps I shouldn't have hit you."

"It wasn't the first time."

She narrows her eyes and points at him, her finger wagging. "Don't try to make it out like you're some innocent--"

"In this case I was."

"But--"

"I know, Granger. What I *meant* before you got all caught up in your indignation, was that I probably wasn't as surprised by your actions as you were. So you can stop trying to ramble on half-apologies to ease your guilt."

"I'm not feeling guilty," she snaps, but he doesn't respond. "I'm not."

He arched a brow and took another sip of his drink. "We'll consider ourselves even."

She snorts, loudly. "My one thing against you just evens out the playing field then?"

"The new one, yes." Though he seems fairly annoyed by her question.

"Fine. Even." She pretends to lick her hand and offers it to him. "We have to shake on it."

He stares at her hand as if it is a house-elf doused in mud and demanding an apology, and looks up at her with less scorn and more incredulity. Hermione winces and thrusts her palm out for him to see the clean skin.

"There's nothing there." His expression remains. "I'm just…joking. It was…"

She drops her hand, now aware that Malfoy either has no sense of humor, she isn't funny, or she hasn't reached a joking stage with him. She clears her throat as he moves back to his drink, and she turns for the now boiling water.

Day: 817; Hour: 11

"I think enemies need one another."

"They don't need one another. They hate one another. If a person's enemy turned their wand on themselves, said person would be delighted." He eyes her meaningfully.

"Then they would have no one to hate, and people need someone to hate in order to get their anger out."

"They could hate themselves, and perhaps that would get you to finally shut up."

"Enemies are people you have to fight for something against. If you could just achieve everything you wanted without anyone there to make it harder for you, then when you finally do get what you want, it doesn't seem important."

"It would still be important, or it wouldn't have been something you wanted in the first place."

"But if it's easy to obtain, in the beginning, you already basically have it. So the

importance loses itself quickly. If you work for something, if you earn it, then you're proud of yourself and hold your achievements closer to you. Their worth something."

"That just makes life harder. Why prefer a harder life?"

"Because it makes you cherish things more."

"Know what I would cherish right now?"

"I think you've been redundant enough for me to wager a good guess."

"I think I've suffered enough."

"Yes, maybe. But I'm still not giving it to you." He snorts, and she looks back out at the sway of the trees with a smile. "You'll appreciate it more when it comes. That's what enemies are for, Malfoy."

Day: 836; Hour: 17

She has conversations with Malfoy under glinting fading suns, because he stays true to the darkness of his demeanor and pretends to be adjusted to a nocturne life. He is slow to wake, and she has learned to wait hours and hours before he is willing to reply to anything she says.

He is there for two weeks, and when he leaves, it is only for four days before he is back again. She wonders if he chose to come back, because she supplies him with conversation (at least bickering) instead of the ignorance he is prone to receive. She doubts this though, because sometimes she catches him looking at her, and it is always darkly or with far too much agitation for her to think herself anything more than a hindrance to him.

She provokes him into arguments, because he doesn't like to talk to her, but she needs someone to talk to at all. He answers when she is insulting or contradictory, but never on polite subjects. She does it anyway, because she is sick of reading conversations instead of having them, and she does not think about everything when there is something else to concentrate on.

She thinks he feels the same. And that is why he answers at all. They are alike despite their differences, and while this is a scary thought, most truths are. She joins him because it is better than being alone, and he does not stay behind a locked door because he knows this as well.

Six

Day: 869; Hour: 2

Nearly all the dishes in the house are littered in shards and ruins across the cheap linoleum floor. It's a pass-through house, which means it was heated and lit for any members of the Order or Ministry who needed a place to stay, but no one spent longer than a week, and no space was claimed for any one individual.

It's the first time she has seen Malfoy in over a month. His presence, sleepy-eyed and bed-headed, has completely taken her off guard when she spots him in the doorway. Breakfast that consists mostly of stale muffins from the back of the pantry and the last of the tea and coffee is a quiet event, until a faceless Auror storms in. The dishes that had been piled on top of the counter in rows are all thrown to the floor in an outcome of rage that doesn't seem gratifying in the least. Malfoy, Fred, and she can only stare in a sort of dazed wonder as he screams nonsensically and smashes the glass to ruins.

It took three of his friends to restrain him and bring him out of the room, and from what Hermione could gather of a few yells and grunts, it seems as if the Auror had lost someone close to him earlier that morning.

It was upsetting to think she had grown almost numb to it. Not to loss, but to the idea of it. While she felt pity for the man, her sadness and grief for him was not acute, but dull and shallow. It was as if everyone had to lose someone during the war. She had mourned with enough grief for them all, each time she was forced into the same sorrow.

The man's outburst still left a bad taste in her mouth though, and an uncomfortable awkwardness in the air, but the three at the table continued on, drinking their morning caffeine in silence, sitting amongst the chaos now on the floor. It felt strange. A little like she might have been dreaming.

"War is such a downer." Fred shakes his head and stirred more sugar into his coffee.

Hermione blinks at him. If there had ever been a more simple, almost flippant way in which she heard all of this *hell* described, she could not recall it. She was surprised. So surprised by his tone, and his choice of wording, that she laughs. Fred looks up in his own surprise at the sound, and when she is busy waiting for him to

say something about it, she hears more amusement to her right.

He is grinning. Malfoy is turning his face into the hand that had previously been pushed against his cheek, doing his best to hide the grin, but she can still see it through the cracks in his fingers, and the slight crinkle of his nose and the corner of his eyes, and the lines around his mouth. She could tell without actually *seeing* it, that he is grinning like a fool. His shoulder shakes with the breath of a laugh, and then another. He turns his eyes from the redhead and onto hers, and it is a moment shared. They both laugh outright, and fifty years could pass, and she will still be able to recall exactly how he looked at that moment.

Day: 870; Hour: 7

Strange music beats with the jangled noises of Alicia's bracelets behind the door. Dean and Seamus play a game of chess, as Lavender recounts her horrifying experience swimming in the lake to Colin. There is an undercooked half-eaten birthday cake in the kitchen with only the first two letters of her name on it, and Seamus has a piece in the scruff on his chin, though no one tells him. As her toes curl in the warmth of the blazing fire, for just a single span of her heartbeat, Hermione swears she is back in Gryffindor tower.

Day: 888; Hour: 3

She huffs, and he grins when he finds her at a loss for a comeback. Hermione gives a scornful look to the way it transforms his face, and the cockiness now set in his demeanor.

He had a way of making you feel special when he smiled, Pansy had said once. She had been horribly drunk at the time, and bits of her lunch had caked the top of Hermione's trainers, and there had been spit hanging from her fingers. She had been a talker when she was drunk, which explained why every time Malfoy was around for it, he put her to bed or was always beside her to change the subject whenever he needed to.

She said he made you feel like he was smiling over an inside joke, and even if the entire room was in hysterics, when his eyes caught yours, it felt like you were the only two who actually *got* it and he wanted to share that second with you because of it. The real smiles though, not his fake ones, or the ones of malice. But the ones that made his whole posture *easy*, and he slumped a little, and one side of his mouth rose higher than the other. When he smiles like *that*.

Hermione likes to think she knows exactly what Pansy had been on about, though

at the time she had been busy calling her a list of unpleasant names inside her head.

Draco Malfoy has a wicked smile. Everything about him is wicked, actually. As if all the parts of him had been thought over and created to form a different way in which to entice people to his way of thinking. Everything about him - his smile, his wit, his intellect, his face, his body - could be used as a weapon. It all just depended on who the opponent was and what he wanted out of them.

Not that she likes to think of Malfoy in this way, but she has forgotten to ignore how attractive he could be, despite the ugliness he shows sometimes.

Day: 913; Hour: 18

Hermione is not sure at all how she seems to have reached a place where she is comfortable sitting next to Malfoy at a table. She knows him in the distant sort of way that comes with a lot of time and gradual talking, but not about anything too personal. Moody seems to notice the change in their bodies, because he looks at both of them strangely before returning to his meal.

Hermione is curious about Malfoy in several different ways, but mostly now in the way the sun lights his hair and the way his fingers handle a fork, though she doesn't know why she is. It is slightly disturbing for her to feel so drawn to him, because she can't describe it, nor explain it, and it is *him*.

She liked to think she still hated him, but when she was alone, she wondered if maybe she didn't know quite how she felt anymore.

Day: 931; Hour: 20

He was beautiful in the faded blue-grey of early morning, though she suspected he would hate to hear it. Despite how vain she had always thought him to be, he actually despises hearing about himself now. Growing up is painful, and one of the hardest things of all is when you can start realizing the truth about yourself as well. Draco Malfoy can be a really ugly person. It is usual, and most the time, but she likes to think there are moments that make up for it.

There probably shouldn't be, but she is the sort of person that looks at absolutely anything and sees something decent about it. It is why he hates her and stays with her both. There is no one else in the world that can hate who he was enough to push for something better out of it. Without her, he would be alone. He likes to argue that he still is.

He is nearly naked. Stretched, defined and pale, and looking more like a man than any other man she has spied lying in her bed before. Granted, she had been just seventeen then, and now she is twenty. Twenty to his twenty-one, and his body is harder from Quidditch, and war, and from being too proud to not be comfortable with his body naked.

She traces his lines with her eyes, creating a visual memory in her retinas to burn into her brain. All the dips and curves and hollows of his upper body. She wants to reach out and run her fingers and hands over that expanse of lit-blue skin, just so she can feel what compact muscle under skin was like. Just so she can know what it was really like to touch a man, and could drag the memory up every time the girls talked, or she read, and she would no longer have to feel like the prude or the shy one ducking from conversation.

Or just so she can know what it was like to touch *him.* Her stomach was alive, and her heart was this beating mess building in tempo against her ribcage every time she entertained the idea of touching him. She hasn't known enough romance in her life yet to know if this is just from the idea of touching a man at all, or if it's because it was *him*. She preferred to think the former, if only for sanity's sake.

A lot of people lose their minds during war. She wanted to believe she can't be one of those people, because she had too much of it to misplace.

He had arrived at Grimmauld several hours ago, and with the few beds in their infirmary taken, she had felt bad about forcing him to sleep on the couch. Ron and Harry's bedrooms had been an option, but not one she was willing to take, and so she had led Malfoy into her own room. Not that he knew it was hers, or he would have had a problem with it, she was sure.

He breathed in shallow little breaths, but exhaled quickly each time, rustling the silver fringe falling across his forehead and eyes. His lids moved in circles and quick scans as he dreamt, and the muscles in his arms and shoulders bunch periodically bracing himself against things unknown. There were bandages taped crooked to his skin, and in the dim light they are maroon, but the sun would prove them bright, bright red she knew. His nails were uneven, dirt lining under and around, and in all the tiny lines of his knuckles and fingers. The row of knuckles on his right hand are black in the dark, swollen and hard to look at. They had gotten most the blood and dirt off him, but there was still a patch of dried blood streaked on his foot, and she always caught herself staring at it. Staring, and staring, and staring.

Day: 937; Hour: 14

Malfoy shifts, the couch dipping further down under his weight, and she has to tug herself back over to the arm so as not fall into him. He flips the channels casually; though he knows it annoys her, and rolls his neck, like watching television is the stressful part of his day.

"Do you know that every year, the sun gets further and further away?"

He looked completely uninterested, landing momentarily on a documentary about mice before moving on again. "Thanks for the useless information, Granger."

"Don't you care?"

"Why should I?"

"Because one day it will end up just being *too* far. Our days will be perpetually dim, and summer will end up like winter. We'll all freeze to death by the time winter comes. Our vegetation will be in ruins. Water will--"

"Why do you keep saying 'our' and 'we'? By the time it happens, it'll be a billion years. By then, the sun will have exploded anyway. To top matters, and the real point, Granger...is that we won't even *be here*. So, again, why should I care?"

"Well, what about future generations? My children's children and so on down my family line, and yours as well."

"They'll deal." He shrugs, tilting his head to follow the curving path of a car on some commercial.

"But--" She stops herself when he turns to look at her.

"Why do you care so much when there's nothing you can do about it? You're always going on about shit you can't ever change, when you should be concentrating on your own bloody life, or problems you can handle. Let it go."

Hermione stares back at him until he turns away, and then watches the side of his face. "I've been trying."

"Oh, yes. Quite obvious, that."

Day: 948; Hour: 1

There are two bright lights, red and purple, jetting toward a man with orange

around his sleeve. His hair is orange too, orange in the sun, and Hermione, for a blinding second, knows that this is Ron and he is dying in front of her. Her feet have already kicked into motion by the time she makes it out as *Seamus* instead, but she was still running, because he might have had a chance to be saved.

Her arm is torn then, burning and ripping, and she cries out at the pain that flares. She sails into air, pulled back by that weight on her arm, and almost falls to her knees. Instead, she is pulled into warmth and cloth, and something hard and obscuring. She sees black, and then a mask of bone, and she screams against the hand covering her mouth.

She recognizes those eyes because she has seen then a million times, but she does not recognize them here, inside that mask, so she begins to struggle.

"Sh! Sh, Granger! It's *me*! It's only me. *Stop.*" He shakes her, and it hurts her arm worse, and he knows because she whimpers on accident.

"Malfoy?"

"Yes," he bites, and she is so busy staring at him that she doesn't even notice he is dragging her behind a fence.

Everything seems to rock and sway, and she was not sure at all when this is supposed to stop being a dream she was having in a random bed, and when it started being real. Her heart pounds in a cacophony of awkward beats, and she cannot breathe at all now.

"You're a Death Eater." She is panting now, and pushes a hand into that heavy cloak and against his chest to push him back, feeling his stomach cave in beneath her touch.

"What? You're...are you blacking out on me? Snap out of it!" He shakes her, bringing the world back in focus a little more.

"No, I'm not blacking..." She shoves him harder. "What...I... When did... How!"

She is panicking now, and everything from her throat to the bottom of her stomach is seizing up in shock. Her eyes are burning and her head is swimming, and she just does not *understand*.

"You're a...a spy? A..."

"Wha--" He cuts himself off and shoves her back, and she gets a good enough glance at his face before he bends to know that he is angry and offended (and perhaps hurt, though she has not placed that look on him yet).

He enlarges a hooded robe, and a mask, and pushes them at her. They fall through her hands as easy as sand, and her palms feel burnt in the wake of them.

"What is going on?"

"Take off your Phoenix band and your robe, Granger, and get dressed in your Death Eater garb. You're joining the Dark Lord's inner circle this evening."

"*What*?"

He tossed neon yellow shoelaces at her. "Lace your boots."

"*Malfoy*

"Is it not *obvious* by now? Lupin sent for backup, and Moody came upon this idea before we left--"

"You did," she whispers, looking up from the shoelaces, and he looks at her before dropping his gaze back down to the hands smoothing out his robe.

"We're all as Death Eaters from this moment on. Phoenix - Granger, pay attention, because I know you're shit at identifying - Phoenix are all yellow shoelaces. Alright? No yellow shoelaces, then that's a Death Eater. Understood?"

"I can't..." She shook her head. "I can't wear this, Malfoy."

"You don't think you can do a lot of hard things, Granger," he mutters, though it's only partly true, and he puts the cold bone of the mask to her face.

She feels his magic like something raw and heated, and there is a static of such power that it sends goosebumps from her neck to her ankles. Her nipples pebble, her womb tightens, and she gasps out in surprise at the feel of it. It scares her as well, because she has never reacted in such a way to someone so quickly. *It is the magic*, she tells herself, again and again.

He is looking at her quite differently when he pulls his hand back, and she has to

drop her eyes to regain her senses. He takes a moment to speak, and when he does, his voice is hushed.

"Simple as that. Now, hurry it up. We don't have all the time in the world."

It takes her awhile to get her head together. "Seamus--"

"Is fine. Hit with a Calming and Stunning spell so he didn't keep trying to send death curses at Longbottom and Thomas."

"And how am I supposed to know who to go after when I have only shoelaces to guide me?"

"They will think the Order left, and take us as their own. When they assemble, we strike."

She pauses, squatting down and ripping the black laces from her boots. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I…I just…I mean, you're wearing…"

His feet shift. "Whatever, Granger. Just hurry it up."

"I am, though." She looks up at him now, and he stares back down at her longer than he should for a man in such a rush.

"Alright."

Day: 949; Hour: 10

Hermione can feel the weight of Tonk's eyes when Malfoy willingly takes the only seat left in the living room and sits beside her. It makes her shift around in her position, and for a second there is *guilt*, strange and bubbling at the base of her throat. Tonks, however, carries on with the normalcy of it; as if it weren't the strangest thing she had probably seen all day.

"Draco, please make it two against one and tell her to turn off the brain-numbing stupidity of this program."

He doesn't answer for several seconds, and Hermione isn't sure if he was even

planning on it before she cuts in. "He's actually the one who refused to change it when I wanted him to weeks ago, so consider the odds still in *my* favor."

Tonks sighs and mutters something, but Hermione is too busy concentrating on the heat at her side to acknowledge what the other woman is saying. More so, she is too busy concentrating on the way Malfoy smells, and after a few sniffs, blushes as she places it. Malfoy gives her an odd look, likely from her obvious smelling of his person, and then smirks at the look on her face.

"You stink," she whispers, as if it will draw the attention away from her embarrassment.

"You over-exaggerate."

"You should shower after...something like that."

"I wasn't up for showering."

"But you were up for that?" He laughs lowly, and she takes a moment to find the double meaning before blushing all over again. "You know what I meant!"

"She wanted me to do it, so I did it."

Hermione snorts. "Like the only reason you did that was because she wanted you to."

"Well I certainly wouldn't have sought her out myself."

"Then why did you do it at all? If..." She trails off at the look he gives her, like she is naive, and suddenly she feels very much like she is. It's not like she doesn't know the answer to the question, but the idea of people sleeping together all over the place -- no matter how much they might not like one another -- is something she has been curious about for a long time now.

"What are you two whispering about over there?" Tonks is leaning toward them, obviously frustrated with her lack of eavesdropping skills.

"Nothing." Hermione answers quickly, and Tonks only grows more suspicious. Hermione sinks into the couch, as far from Malfoy as she can. The smell of him is making her think of things she does not wish to think about at all.

Day: 951; Hour: 22

"Hermione!" It is hissed and low, and she can see the shock red of Seamus' hair despite the cover of night.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Malfoy's voice is equally low, but tremendously more pissed off.

"My Phoenix band flew off, and I had to--"

"I don't *give a shit*. I told you stay on the fucking path, so stay on the fucking path!" he snarls, and it is very different from the moody but detached man she has gotten used to. Instead, it is very much like the one she used to know, and it makes her stand there like a gaping moron for far longer than his patience allows.

His fingers are tight, clamping around her arm as he yanks and shoves her forward, sending her stumbling over her own feet to gain balance.

"Hey!" Seamus steps forward, but Hermione is stepping forward with him.

"Don't touch me, Malfoy."

"Then *move*. We don't have time for you to mosey about after shit."

"No. No, *don't* touch me. I'll move when I damn well please, and you have no right to make that decision for me!"

"Alright. Alright, I'm sorry, Granger. You wanted to go find your band right?" He grabs her arm again, swinging her back the way she had been going. "By all means. Find us when you're done, or perhaps we'll just find *you* to Portkey back to the morgue. Sounds like a fantastic plan."

He shoves her back again, gesturing for her to go before she can even speak. Seamus rushes at him, and he is quick to draw his wand, the point pushing into the beard stubble of Seamus' neck. Hermione draws hers as well, and Malfoy finds it aimed at his face when he swings his eyes back to her.

He passes her off. He *passes her off*, looking back at Seamus as if she poses no threat at all. And *damn it* because he's right! Damn it, because she wouldn't do anything in a situation like this, unless she thought he would try to hurt her. She lowers her wand and shoves him instead, and finds his attention back on her once again. She shoves him harder, forcing him a step back, and darts her hands away when he makes a grab for them with his free one.

"What, Malfoy? Don't like people trying to shove you around? Is--"

He manages to grab her wrist this time, yanking her forward until she crashes into him. Seamus takes the opportunity to draw his own wand, while Malfoy lowers his head until his forehead touches her. His eyes are hot and angry, but she doesn't waver for a moment.

"Don't fuck with me, Granger."

"Don't fuck with *me*."

As Seamus' wand tip hits Malfoy's temple, the blond snarls and smirks, letting go of her wrist to grab her shoulder and yank her behind him. He returns his eyes to Seamus' furious ones, and Hermione thinks that if it is not for the sudden appearance of the rest of the team, something would have begun that she would not have been able to stop.

"We'll finish this later then, Finnigan."

"You fucking bet."

Day: 952; Hour: 8

"It was extremely childish. On both parts." She glares at Malfoy's swollen eye before looking back to the frazzled and still angry redhead, currently sporting a broken nose.

"I was defending you." Seamus' voice is thick and nasally, and Hermione shakes her head.

"You were angry, and have been. Don't use me as an excuse."

"It's what pushed me over the edge."

She shakes her head again, pushing his hair out of his face to inspect his injury more. "And right in Moody's office, of all places! It was a good thing he made sure to de-wand you both before it ended up even more barbaric."

He huffs a breath, hitting her in the face with hot air and the smell of chocolate. Once convinced he would be fine, she looks up to see Malfoy still sitting at the side of the bed, glaring at her as best he could. She feels like saying something childish, along the lines of 'you started it', but bites her tongue. Literally.

Day: 952; Hour: 21

"I would like to see the sun rise over the bay." She doesn't know why she bothered to look for the current high-on-pain reliever blond, but found herself lying beside him when she saw him in the snow at the back of the house. Silence had somehow turned into a very long conversation on many things, and now she finds herself discussing what they would like to do if they end up staying awake all night.

"What bay?"

"I don't know. Just a bay."

He pauses, giving her time to wait and stare at the white puffs of air vapor from both their mouths. "You are weirder than I first thought you were."

It is her turn for silence now. "Is that a bad thing?"

He shrugs -- she can hear the sound of his clothes rubbing against his skin as he does. "It should be."

"But *is* it?"

His fingers flick across the mound of sparkling snow between them, and for a wild second, she thought he might take her hand, but he does not. "No."

Day: 960; Hour: 5

Hermione's fingers skim over the lines of potion ingredients, her list for the Grimmauld infirmary stock growing quickly on the parchment beside the book. When she glances up, Lupin is looking curiously at her, and seems to have been for some time now.

"What is it?" She ignores the impulse of wiping off her face.

"I've heard some interesting news."

Her head snaps up, because this could be about absolutely everything that rushes past the walls of her head. "About who?"

"You." Not so interesting then.

"What about then?"

"I heard you and Malfoy seem to be getting on fairly well."

She blushes, and it makes it look far worse than it is, but she can't control her reaction. "Tonks has been talking, has she?"

"Just that you both seem better acquainted with one another."

"I see him around a lot, and he's usually the only person I know to some degree. No one else is very talkative."

"He is?"

When I get him angry. "At times."

"I can't say I saw it coming."

"There's not really an 'it'."

"Even a semblance of normalcy between the two of you, I meant. Conversation and standing one another's presence goes a long way from where you both began."

"Yes, well... I can't say I saw it coming either." He is still looking at her curiously. "It's not like we're friends, Lupin."

"And what would be wrong with that if you were?"

"Everything."

"Like?"

"The fact that all my friends hate him, the fact that he's still arrogant, opinionated, and *mean*. Who he is and where he came from, and the things that he has done. I was sick of not talking. Sometimes he talks back."

"He's done a lot of good things the past year or so."

"But it doesn't erase all the bad things from the past ten years or so."

"No? Grudges make you old, Hermione."

"He was a nasty, racist boy--"

"Was, did you say?" He looks up from his own book then, smiling slightly at her. "Malfoy has made bad decisions in his life, and has been involved in a lot of bad situations. The man at the bottom of the hill, Hermione. And he kept pushing, and the boulder kept rolling back. Do you remember the story?"

"Yes."

"Young Malfoy has spent most of his life building that boulder, and the past year pushing it up the hill. Every mission gone right, every achievement he has reached with the Order, sends him forward a step. And every hated word, argument, prejudice, and look on the faces of his friends, when he faces them from the other side, has him faltering back one or two more. I don't know when he'll finally push it over and rid himself of his own failures, and of the hardship he created for himself. But he still keeps trying, doesn't he?"

Day: 964; Hour: 19

Hermione looks at Malfoy with Lupin's words repeating in her head, and he sends her glares to let her know that he knows she is staring and finds it bothersome.

Perhaps she has been looking at this wrong. Maybe you can't separate a person into two. One had to accept the past and the present as one constant flow in order to move on into the future, or that person would be hopelessly unmoving.

Malfoy *had been* several things, and he still *is* many different things, and those aspects make up who he was as a single human being. He is an enemy and an ally, someone to ignore and a person to talk to. He is contradictory, but that is part of what makes him a person. Not everything has to have changed in order for someone to be different. Malfoy will never be made of perfection, but he will no longer be made out of hate and racism.

This is a starting point, and an ending. It is a chance she had been reluctantly giving halves of for months now. *Let him have it,* she thinks. *Let him push the boulder over.* And they would all be better people for it.

Day: 969; Hour: 3

Christmas is dull, and not much like Christmas at all. The house is bare of decorations, an Auror stares glumly at the snowfall, and Malfoy keeps his nose buried in his notebook most the day. Besides a muttered 'Merry Christmas' in reply to her, he doesn't speak to her until the day is almost officially over.

She watches old Christmas movies, and Malfoy joins her for hot chocolate; when she tells him she will not talk about their mission tomorrow until Christmas is over, he makes fun of the movie every three minutes and then starts going over the plan exactly one minute after midnight.

Day: 975; Hour: 12

She does not receive her Christmas gifts until New Year's Eve, in a delivery from Fred and Ginny, though she likes to think their comforting presence is a gift in itself. There is no television in the house she is in now, so Fred and Dean rig a light bulb to a string for the thirty second countdown. It hits the ground unbroken before they even reach the last ten digits thanks to Justin's impatient hand, but Fred still stomps on it merrily at the end, and spills his wine over everyone in the room.

It almost makes up for Christmas.

Day: 981; Hour: 4

"I think just about everything in life seems like a great thing in the beginning. Like kids leaving in a car for a fun night out, but who never think of the car crash that ends up happening. Like every beginning of war, because people think there's freedom and power waiting for them at the end, instead of thinking about the middle. Or even Midas. Midas with his golden touch, and who must have thought the world was in his hands before he completely ruined his life."

"There are things that begin bad but end up finishing much differently as well."

"But why was it bad? It must have been something good in the beginning, or a person wouldn't find themselves in that situation at all."

"Well maybe they just *thought* it would be good, even if it wasn't." Hermione wonders if this is a piece of his boulder, because at times he thinks he's covering the parallel, but Hermione finds a lot of references to his life no matter what he says.

"But it's the same thing. It starts great -- because it is, or you thought it would be, or because someone told you it is. But then...then bam. People walk around every day of their lives, and never expect the car crash."

"Maybe there isn't one."

"Maybe there is."

He turns from the stove, cocking his head at her. "And you're going to spend every day of your life thinking about it?"

"I think anyway." She shrugs. "I like to be prepared."

"I don't think that's a life at all."

"What about you then? You don't wait for the fallout?"

He snorts, collecting the sugar bowl from the top of the fridge where he likes to hide it. "We're *in* the bloody fallout, Granger."

"So you're waiting for the buildup?"

"I'm waiting to wake up after the crash. I don't want to inflate my head too much with things that don't matter yet. I've heard it causes brain damage." He looks at her meaningfully, and she scowls at him in turn.

"No. It's just that you're head is too large already to fit anything else inside."

"Don't try to knock up my head size to compare it to yours, just so you feel better about yourself."

"Malfoy, I knock you *down* when I want to feel better about myself."

He releases a quick breath, which can be a laugh or a sigh. "Slytherin."

"Hufflepuff." He points his spoon like a weapon and glares.

Day: 989; Hour: 17

Hermione threw the newspaper down, the four-month-old headline smacking against the table. "Muggles are *not* behind in the evolution process!"

"Of course they are. Survival of the fittest--"

"No! It's like a gene, all right? It's a *gene*, like the color of your eyes. And if two parents have blue eyes, it's nearly impossible that the child will have brown eyes. But sometimes that slips through the cracks, and a child *will* be born with brown eyes. Which is why there are Squibs, and why there are people like *me*! Most often, if there are two Muggle parents, the child is a Muggle. Two wizarding, a wizarding child."

"This doesn't disprove my point that Muggles are behind. They have no magic! They lack the capability that we have. They are like a whole word of Squibs, Granger. An entire Squib filled population, and if one was found, every researcher in the Ministry would be trying to figure out *what went wrong*."

"That's different! A whole community of Squibs could be a problem because they all must have *come* from *wizarding* parents in order to be a Squib. So the gene is getting lost somewhere. Muggles and wizards hardly integrate, and when they do, they stay in the wizarding world where they are allowed to *do* magic. That is why it doesn't spread throughout the Muggles. Because they never had it."

"*Exactly*! They never had it! We're hundreds of generations in on our magical capabilities, and it has never shown in the Muggle world except for odd cases. Why is it that we hold magic, but they don't? Why is it that they haven't formed it over thousands of years? Because they are *behind* in evolving--"

"Or maybe they are just that way! Maybe *you're* behind in evolving--"

"I'm the one with the capability! How am *I* the one behind?"

"Maybe it's just a weird mutation that started, and has never evened out--"

"Mutation... A fucking *mutation*?"

"And you know, for someone trying to redeem themselves, you're still racist!"

"I'm racist?"

"Yes, you're racist!" Hermione nods, as if he should have gotten this a long time ago.

He hits the table, slamming it up against the wall, the leg smacking off her kneecap. "I'm the fucking racist? You just compared magic to a fucking mutation, but *I'm* the racist? You're a fucking hypocrite!"

"You have an anger problem!"

"All you *do* is judge people! You're waiting for the next incriminating word or action as much as you're waiting for your fucking fallout! You put people in lines, and all you do is *judge* everything and twist it into how you think it should be, instead of finding out what it is! If they don't act like you, talk like you, think like you, and breathe like you, then they must be something *beneath* you, right? Shoved

under your sensible fucking Mary-Janes."

"I judge people because I *know*

"You think you know. You think you're so clever, and have got everything figured out. You walk around like most the world owes you something, but here's a life lesson, Granger." He leans in, face red and eyes hard. "The world owes *everyone* something. You are *not* the only one who feels screwed over by other people, because everyone feels they have been. From you, to me, to Harry-Fucking-Potter, to Voldemort. You don't have the *right* to judge them, and still go on about--"

"You don't know anything about me! You're prattling on about me judging people, at the same time that you're judging me! You're--"

"How does it feel when the tables turn?" he growls, furious.

She stands then, too angry for stillness. "How does it *feel* to be judged? I'm the Mudblood, Malfoy, don't you remember? You're the fucking pureblood who thought himself so much better, and I'm the Mudblood who didn't belong. *Remember*? Do you fucking *remember*?" She screams, and hiccups, and thinks she might start bawling her eyes out from frustration and so many other things.

He straightens up, leaning back, as if she has slapped him. *Yes, Malfoy. Yes, remember* that, *Mr. Redeemed. Mr. I'm-Forgetting-About-My-Fucking-Boulder!*

"Maybe the reason I judge people is because I know they're judging *me*. I learned that the day I *met you*, didn't I? It's self-defense. It's how I protect *myself,* because I pay attention, and find out whose opinion is not *worth* worrying myself over. And you can't *take* that from me, Malfoy. You can't take it, when you're the one who gave it to me in the first place!"

"Poor, poor, Hermione," he whispers. "Poor Hermione Granger, with her bad childhood and mean schoolboys."

"Don't you *dare* belittle what I--"

"Alright, you want to get the shit out in the air then? Is that what you want?" He slams his palm down on the table, hard enough to make her jump. "All I *knew* was how to hate you, because that was how I was raised. There was no other way of looking at it, because that was the only way I thought it could be. Just as how you

grew to hate *me*. I acted out in that hate, just as *you* did as well."

"I made no personal offense against you until you insulted me and attempted backward plans to hurt me and my friends!" she yelled. "I did *nothing* to make you that way."

"You didn't *have* to! I had knowledge, all stored up between my temples. I had facts, and lessons. Your *kind* was taking over, and they were bringing disease and dishonor, and they didn't *belong* there, taking things from us. *Their world* was on the *other side* of ours. They were stupider, uglier, *dirtier*, and something had to be done to bring peace back to our lives. I believe I heard something along the same lines from Moody just last month."

"But I still didn't do--"

"Your offense, at my mind set then, was just *being* there. For doing what I learned to hate you for, because you weren't supposed to *be here*. Even when I was younger, I had no reason to think about Muggle genocide. It was the ones *here,* taking what was *ours* that I wanted to get rid of. So I hated you. I fucking hated you so much."

"And--"

"But as much scorn as I subjected you to, you gave me the same. You may not have been racist, but you still hated me just as much."

"For the person that you were, rather than *what* you were! You hated me for something I couldn't change!"

"And you hated me for the same! So what the fuck is the difference?"

"There's a huge difference!"

"Like what?"

"If you hadn't hated me Malfoy, I would not have hated you. I was obligated, even just to defend myself!"

"And so was I!"

"No, you weren't!"

"Don't fucking tell me! You didn't *live* my life, Granger! And there's your problem,

again. Judging, and never looking at the other side of things."

"I look from another person's view when they deserve for me to."

"When you deem them worthy of it, you mean?"

"Yes, wh--"

"There you go then. There. You. Go. Except I didn't start looking from your view until most the damage had been done, and *you* have. Never. Started."

"Because Death Eaters have proved themselves worthy? Ha! They--"

"Because *I* have!" he yells.

Silence. Hermione finds them both breathing hard, not a foot apart, and red in the face. She stares up at him, forgetting her anger for surprise, but he is still holding tight to his rage. The chords in his neck are tight, his eyes flashing, and his fists are balling and releasing at his sides.

"I'm not a racist," he whispers fiercely. "I am not *him* anymore. I didn't say Muggles aren't intelligent, or creative, or absolutely everything else that we are as well. All I said, is that they are behind in gaining magical ability. That was *it*. It was *you* who decided that must have meant they were a lesser people -- not me."

He stares a moment longer before stalking away, his bones jilted on tight muscles.

Day: 991; Hour: 12

Neville laughs, stirring his coffee so that the spoon clinks off the side as many times as he moves it. "Was it bad?"

"I don't know. I just... It's like he keeps trying to pry my eyes open when I'm already looking."

"He had a point though. A little."

"I *know*. That's what bothered me the most. Because I don't feel he has a right for me to have enough pity or feeling to look at it all from his point of view and understand why he did the things he did. Yet, if I want to understand *him*, then maybe I have to. *I'm* the one who *he* tried to alienate, but he just turns it around."

"That's because it *was* the other way for him. And, Hermione, not for nothing, but the fact that he's even trying to explain it to you so you *do* understand, has got to mean something."

"He's trying to feel less guilty over the things he has done. Or just wants to live easier now by not having me jumping on the things he says."

"The fact that he would feel guilty means something too, though. As well as--"

"I know, Neville. I know. And that's why I decided to give him a shot, you know? I give him a chance, and then I go back to thinking he's not worth it. Then another chance, then I take it back. I'm seesawing back and forth, and it's ridiculous."

She feels awkward opening herself up to Neville, when it is something she doesn't do much with anyone. However, her conflict with Malfoy has been agitating at best and infuriating usually, and she needs someone to speak to who doesn't hate him.

Or maybe just someone to talk to about anything at all. She found herself having the most brain dead conversations with people just for the sake of speaking.

"You're letting yourself be vulnerable, and so you're keeping up defenses because you *know* you are vulnerable. And you're not going to go very far like that."

She sighs. "So I should just drop my defenses? It's *Draco Malfoy*."

"No, no. I mean you should stop looking at him like he's going to become his former self at any moment. Too much has happened for it to be that way. I'm saying that you shouldn't go in expecting everything to be different, but you shouldn't jump to conclusions about what he says, until you're sure you know what he means by it. Or else it's useless, because you're too used to looking for the insults that you're not paying attention to much of anything else. You're finding the hidden plastic Easter eggs that have nothing inside of them."

"Nice metaphor."

"I've been thinking of it since you started talking, so I had to add it in there." He blushes, and she laughs.

Day: 994; Hour: 2

Hermione writes and writes, far past the time her hand has cramped, and continues up until she signs her name. By the time she drops it off at Arthur

Weasley's desk, she is close to positive her hand will dry up and fall off by morning.

She does not care that a letter will likely not reach them for months, because at least she knows she did her part in trying.

Day: 996; Hour: 10

A man with a long black beard sits beside her when Malfoy enters the kitchen. She is nervous to see him, but slightly relieved in a strange way -- the man at the table has been looking at her oddly for twenty minutes now.

You're Hermione Granger, he had stated. *Yes*, she had replied. And then he had stared.

She glances up from Malfoy's hand, frozen around the sugar bowl. A perplexed expression rearranges his facial features, and the blank look on the Auror has changed to a stunned one.

"What?" she asks, alarmed.

"Your ass."

"*What*?" She looks back to Malfoy, and his eyes track down her body as he juts his chin toward her.

"I believe your ass is on fire, Granger."

She blushes, sure this is meant to be a joke of some sort, until the heat in her back pocket reaches a level where she is sure she is not imagining it. She stands quickly, bumping the table and sending cold tea sloshing over the side of her mug. The coin in her pocket is so scalding hot that it burns her fingertips, the letters from Harry and Ron floating to the ground behind the coin still spinning to a stop on the floor.

She waves her hand for the cool air against her injured tips, bending down quickly with her other hand to scoop up the smoking piece of parchment. It is yellow compared to the color of the others, and she knows it is the first letter Harry sent her since his departure.

"Shit!" she breathes, waving the paper and stopping the gradual descent of the red and orange line from turning the rest of it to ash. Her heart lurches painfully, because it is something *treasured* that is half ash and half burnt parchment in her

hand. A ball wells and grows inside her throat, and she must blink several times as she unfolds the parchment to find most of the letter gone.

She is uncaring to how she must look to the two men, standing there and almost crying over a burnt piece of paper, but she feels negligent and horrible. She could probably quote the thing line for line. But that didn't change the fact that it was *gone*. Just as gone as Harry was to her now too.

"How did it start?" the Auror asks her, and she ignores him at first, breathing heavy as she refolds the paper.

"Granger." Malfoy is more insistent and far less patient, and she looks up at him and swallows hard.

"It…uh… What?"

"Is the coin activated? Is that what started the paper on fire?" the Auror speaks up again.

"It shouldn't have gotten that hot." Malfoy stares disdainfully down at the gold coin, a scorch mark now circular in the floor.

"The…the coin. Oh! Oh, the *coin*! Someone…trouble…I…" Hermione shakes her head, growing frantic, and darts barefooted from the house before she can form a coherent sentence.

Seven

Day: 1000; Hour: 16

Hermione has been here for several days. Several days and then several more. She remembers getting to Grimmauld Place after wandering the front yard of the safe house dazed and frantic for thirty seconds. The place had been almost empty, except for Moody and two Aurors who were bounding down the steps as she burst through the living room. Moody had pushed something into her hand, and she had had just enough time to be thankful that her wand was wrapped in her hair before the madness kicked in.

She remembers having to retreat, falling back as Death Eaters closed in, but she had kept her mind about her. The air was open and clear, and she could see and think and know. It had been Ginny who had activated the coin, her urgency evident in the level of heat it had brought, as they had been grossly outnumbered until the call for backup came.

It had been hectic, screams rebounding off the walls, and spells missing the mark more than they hit. Hermione didn't think she had been at it for more than an hour before she backed around a corner and found herself stunned. She had not had the luck of looking up to find an apologetic face, instead triumphant eyes greeted her through a bone mask, and she was sunk with immobility and the coldness of her dread.

There had been walls, and awkward body positions; hushed voices that hit her eardrums with incoherent noise, and then the blinding pain of a Cruciatus before everything had gone black.

She had found herself in a cell when she awoke, small and stone, the bars uneven and tight together. She spent days waiting for them to come back to get her and bring her to Voldemort, or to do the things she had heard in prisoners horror stories. She had spent even longer waiting for her friends. But no one came.

Day: 1002; Hour: 1

There had been the foulest scent in the very beginning. Like feces and rot, and she gagged on the stench of it every time she breathed. She had gotten used to it though, which is unfortunate. The stink had put her off to food, and now *all she can think about* is eating. She doesn't care if it is something she hates, like meatloaf,

because Hermione thinks she could eat a human being right now. She could close her eyes and eat her own kind, because she had never *known* a hunger like this. Her stomach was tangled in knots, hard to the touch, and woke her with pains.

Her thirst was different, but the same in need. Her lips were chapped bloody, her saliva slow and unhelpful, and her mouth dried out like it has been baking in the sun for all these days. Even the walls of her throat feel like sandpaper, and all she tasted was dust and dirt on her palette.

The darkness was constant, engulfing. All she had were her thoughts, and sometimes she realized they were growing more irrational. She thought about faith, and religion, and she wondered if she was already dead and waiting for something from that great unknown that people spent their entire lives trying to figure out. It could be hell; her here, in pain, in the dark, alone forever. Who she was, what she has done, all that she knew no longer mattered here.

She thought she might die here, and she is terrified, constantly. But then she doesn't, because she knew this was what *they* wanted her to believe. She had always been stronger then what they thought she was. Always, and always, and always.

Day: 1003; Hour: 15

She knew of delirium though she had never experienced it before. Sometimes she heard footsteps or murmurs, and other times she thought she saw shadows though there was no light at all. And that was why, when her vision turned bright white and then hot red, she believed she was dying or imagining things. Even with the shriek that followed, and the sudden mad jangled noise of metal hitting metal.

"Hermione!" The woman repeats her name four, five times before she can place it.

Lavender. Or what she imagined to be Lavender. She was not sure, because it felt like it has been years, and she was tired and exhausted, and still could not see.

The metal clanking grows louder, harder, and she heard a voice running off a slew of...unlocking charms? Then it stops with a frustrated cry, and calls for possibly the last person she expected to hear the name of, though she isn't sure why. "Draco! How did you-- Draco!"

"There's still other fucking people!" Yes. Yes, that was Malfoy. "For shit sake, get the light out of her face, Brown."

There is a commotion, and Hermione's heart beats wildly at the erratic light swinging across her cell before there is warmth. Her breath is rushing quickly, because she can *feel* now, and they must be *here*. They are *here*, with Lavender's over-perfumed arms wrapped around her shoulders.

"Don't cry, Hermione. You're all right now. We're getting you out of here." Neville's voice is soothing from her side, his hand on her dirty, greasy hair, and she does not realize she was crying until he says it. And then suddenly, she cannot hold back, and she sobs loudly into the sharp curve of Lavender's shoulder.

Lavender cries with her, squeezing her hard enough to send jolts of pain up her already cramped stomach. "We thought... Oh, Hermione."

"I hate to break up the reunion," Malfoy drawls, "but we have several other cells to check, and a building to search."

"Just give us a second!" Lavender snaps, delicately removing the tears from her makeup smeared face with a single finger. "Come on. Let's get you back to get you checked out."

Lavender lifts her arm, Neville grabbing the other to help pull her to her feet. The movement is too much, and she finds her body cannot support her weight or the motions. A fire ignites along her bones of pain and powerful ache. She cries out in response and they drop her, startled.

Malfoy is there then, speaking over the sounds of her friends rushed questions and apologies. His grip is gentler than she imagines it has ever been when he grasps her chin and pulls her head back to look up at him. His eyes are intense on hers, inspecting her own, her face, opening her mouth to look along her gums.

"How long since you have eaten?"

She means to answer him by letting him know she has no idea, but all that comes out is a rasp and crack, and she coughs on dust and dryness. She shakes her head, the force of the cough robbing her of breath, heavy in her chest.

Malfoy holds her chin firmer, lifting a red marker and placing the wet tip against her forehead. She closes her eyes, remembering the red letters on prisoner's foreheads to inform the infirmary of what was known to be wrong. She is one of them, she realizes. The dirty and torn, once missing people, who line beds behind floating curtain walls.

"Close your eyes, Granger," he whispers, softly, making him unrecognizable to her for several dizzying seconds.

She does as he says, and a hot, damp cloth presses into her palm. He closes her dull fingers around it, holding it, and slips the cloth from between her fingers. The stone is ice cold in counter to the fabric, and there is a pull before she is gone from the cell all together.

Day: 1008; Hour: 12

It takes her five days in the infirmary before the Healers let her go. They try to give her therapy sessions, but she does not accept them. *I was kidnapped, I was hungry. That's it,* she tells them, because it is the truth. She did not walk away scarred, and she considered herself luckier for it than she had ever been in her life. The man who had taken her must have gone back to the fight and was killed or captured, she thought, because that was the only reason she could have been abandoned there. Unfortunately, she knows the price on her head from being Harry Potter's best friend.

She does not see Malfoy, but there is a long night with Neville and Lavender both as they recount events and she tells them the same story she gave the Healers and Lupin both. She does not see Malfoy again for over three weeks, and it isn't until then that she notices just how much she has gotten used to him.

Day: 1030; Hour: 20

"I thought you went to bed." He looks up at her in the dull colors from the television, speaking lowly. She can still hear him, the TV muted, and only the silence of the old room between them.

"*I did,*" she answers, taking a seat across from him. Malfoy watches television a lot at night, and even when they aren't somewhere with a TV set (which is usual), he still sits and stares as if there is one there.

"Did you hear something?"

"Just now?"

"That woke you?" He looks paranoid, and she thinks he has been spending too much time with Moody.

"Oh, no. I…it was strange. Have you ever been dreaming, and then just woken up

for no apparent reason? It wasn't a nightmare or anything, but I just woke up in the middle of it wide awake."

He shrugs, settling his eyes back on the fitness infomercial. "I've heard it's because you're emotionally connected to something that is or has happened at that exact moment, and so you feel propelled to recognize it."

Hermione furrows her brows. "Where did you hear that?"

His lips turn up in a slow smirk. "Professor Trelawny, actually."

"Go figure," she mutters sourly.

"It has some merit. I'm not sure about the connection to an event in your past life aspect of it, but...say, a woman's intuition."

"That something is happening to someone I know?"

"Comforting, isn't it?" he mumbles, flipping the channel to a cosmetic infomercial now.

"You're a prat."

"You're a bitch."

"You're a ferret."

"You're a beaver."

"Git."

"Whore."

"Slut."

"Cu--"

"Eh!" She points at him, eyeing him dangerously.

He snorts. "What is it with women and that word?"

"It's offensive. It's a *dirty* word."

He smirks again, the look he aims at the screen is something she can't place. "There's nothing wrong with getting a bit dirty, Granger."

At first, she thinks this may having something to do with bloodlines, but it only takes a second after the thought to realize just *what* sort of smirk he was giving. She blinks rapidly at the flirtatious undertones, and wills the mad blush on her cheeks away.

Day: 1035; Hour: 7

Hermione hits the ground with a loud smack, all the air pressure inside of her evaporating past her lips. She blinks, blankly, at the tall Ministry ceilings before regaining her mind, which seemed to shoot out the back of her head as soon as she hit the wall. Or glass. Or whatever it had been.

She lifts herself up on her elbows, dizzily watching static blue lines sinking into the doorframe. The door she had pushed open is still ajar, giving her a perfect view of half the laughing people inside the room. She glares at them, heated brightly, and takes her wand from her pocket at Neville's pity-filled (yet *smiling*) face gesturing for her to put it on the table beside the door.

Ever since a heated meeting several months ago, when three Aurors were hexed, it was taken as a safety precaution to leave all wands outside of the room. Hermione hasn't been to a meeting at the Ministry since far before that, and it had not been anything anyone told her to do.

She drops her wand on the table, tentatively trying to pass through the doorway again. She keeps her eyes hard on the floor, taking a position around the small table at the center of the circle.

"Shut up, Malfoy." He ignored her, shoulder still shaking with silent laughter.

"Thanks for dropping in, Hermione," Fred whispered, smacking a palm off her shoulder.

"Lame," Hermione told him, giving him a petulant look before turning back to the older man nearly screaming across from her.

"He should be brought back! This is the whole reason he was there in the first place!"

"I assure you that he is used to danger, and can handle himself well."

"This is different! You-Know-Who has found out about the missing Horcruxes, and he is furious! He *knows* there are only two left, and has disbanded some of his followers to collect both before Harry can!"

Hermione can actually feel the tips of her ears pull up as she hears Harry's name, and the middle of the argument she walked into is now beginning to make more sense.

"We know the locations, Harry and his team are currently en route--"

"There's not enough! What if the Death Eaters have already gotten it, and are waiting there for him? What if he gets there, and then they show up? It's dangerous enough that they'll know where he's heading and so the whereabouts of his location. You want to send our only hope of winning the war right into the hands of Death Eaters?"

"I agree," Tonks spoke up. "Not that Harry can't handle himself, but it's dangerous. He would need more people."

"He doesn't even have to go. Pull him out, bring him home, and send in others," another woman spoke.

"And what if it's too late by then?" Arthur stepped forward. "I love Harry, and we all know that. But no one can Apparate to either location because none of us have been there. If we pull Harry and his team out, it could put us a day behind them. By then, the Death Eaters would surely be there."

"They might be already!"

"We can Apparate or Portkey to the nearest towns of each location, and from there, it's just about locating the--"

"We can't risk--"

"Harry wants to finish--"

"He won't--"

"What if--"

"I believe he can--"

"Alright!" Moody bangs his fist against the table, effectively causing everyone to fall into silence.

It's McGonagall who speaks after though, her face more weathered than Hermione has ever seen it. "I believe it is in the best interest of Mister Potter that we bring him back. We'll send the rest of the team with him in, but Harry must come back. We cannot risk it, no matter how much we may want to. It is not worth his life, and there are others there to cover for him."

"So it's worth theirs?" Seamus asks, with far more nerve than Hermione has known from him.

Arthur and Molly's head lower simultaneously, because they both know Ron will go either way and Hermione's heart lurches painfully inside her chest. *It is not worth the war,* is what McGonagall had meant, because that was the truth. Harry had become the hero, the livelihood, before he could even speak more than a handful of words. Ron was dispensable. They all were.

"Don't be trite, Finnigan," Malfoy snaps.

"Harry has an uncanny ability to locate the Horcrux at each location. We all can't ignore the fact that he is connected to the Dark Lord, and that that link seems to be helping in the search--"

"I believe Dumbledore would have sent him in." Colin Creevey raises his head, and half the room stares at him for the name he has brought forth, and the other half send glances in Malfoy's direction. He shifts next to her, the fabric of his cloak brushing against her side. She spares a glance at him from the corner of her eye, and his head is not bowed as she expects, but raised and greeting.

"*However*," Moody continues from where he was cut off, both eyes unerringly set on a very twitchy Colin. "In the end, it's in our best interest for him to come home. We're in contact with two members of his team to make sure he is forced to follow the order, instead of the disobedience he is more known for."

"But--"

"Albus Dumbledore," Moody hisses, again focused on Colin, "was not a fool. There are other options, and the Ministry and most of us in attendance seem to agree that we will be taking them."

"Aye," was the general call that swept the room, a few adamant yells of

disagreement buried under.

Malfoy raised his hand, still tense from their old Headmaster's name being in the conversation. "I'll go."

"Ron won't work with you," Hermione blurted, before she even knew if she would speak at all, and Malfoy turns a very steely look to her.

"He has."

"No, he-- What?"

He glares at her for several more seconds before turning his eyes back to Moody. "I'll go."

Moody nods and sweeps the room. "We need two teams. Backup for Harry's team, and another to go to the other location. Who else?"

Hermione's hand rose to join every single other one in the room.

Day: 1038; Hour: 17

It has been desolate for days. Hermione does not see a single person, and there was an eerie silence around her or in her chest. She knew that there were very important things happening at every moment that she sits and breathes, and it frustrated her that so many are a part of it, but she was still sitting safe.

She cannot read, or think properly, or sit still. Her insides were too alive for her to calm down, and there is no one there to rid her concentration on what else was going on. The only thing that had her gathering her frustration had been the possibility of seeing Harry. But he had not come and she didn't know where he was. She broods, and waits, and time grows frantic in her veins as she waited for some sort of news. Not knowing has always been what Hermione considered the worst thing. Even if it was bad news, there were plans and ways to deal after. Not knowing anything meant she had nothing to figure out, but a million different possibilities that could or could not be true.

Day: 1041; Hour: 2

An Auror shows up six days in, but she sleeps and sleeps, until Hermione thinks she may be dead in her room.

Day: 1043; Hour: 1

"Granger."

She jumps, her bones stretching in surprise, and her hand loses grip of the cup she was holding sending it shattering to the floor. Glass chips and ice tea cling to the legs of her jeans, and she yelps when she steps to turn and cuts her foot.

"*What*?" she barks at the blond, his eyebrow raised high as he leaned casually against the doorframe.

"You're getting blood all over the floor."

"Shove off!" She is quite moody when in pain, and she limps her way to the table.

Malfoy sighs and grabs a dishcloth, wetting it and tossing it hard enough at her, that it slaps her forehead. "You're not very coordinated."

"Well maybe if you didn't just creep up on people like that."

"Or if you just listened better. I think the only thing you pay attention to is the sound of your own voice."

"I may talk a lot, Malfoy, but at least I'm not obsessed with mirrors and keeping my hair shiny."

His eyebrows rose then, and she thought this might have been a bad time to try and attack his old vanity, considering his rumpled state and the scruff of a beard on his face and neck.

"I can tell," he drawls sardonically. She shoots him a look at his reply and he smirks.

"How's Ron? Did you get it?"

The smirk falls away, and he is carefully blank, and more devoid of a reaction than the Auror had been when she asked her the same question. "I can't tell you that."

She snorts. "You *owe* me that much."

"I owe you nothing."

"If it weren't for *you*, I would have found out myself!"

"Moody chose--"

"Because *you told him* not to have me go!"

"Your capability wouldn't have matched the demands had we been greeted by Death Eaters upon our arrival." He dropped back into a bored, professional drawl.

"That's rubbish! I would have been perfectly fine in that setting! I've gotten better--"

"But not good enough."

It is something she knew, but not something she would take from him anyway. She threw the washcloth at him, which he ducks, though the fact that she still *tried* to throw a bloody washcloth at him gets him angry enough.

"Who are you to tell me that? You're no one!" she yelled, and his face grows fierce as he takes three steps toward her. "You've hardly seen me at battles--"

"I've seen you enough, and you're *shit*. You would have fucking killed yourself, and I'm sure that would have done wonders for Potter, since Weasley was already on the line as well. Don't you think? Are you there at *all* when you fight? There's--"

"I am, and that's why I know I would have been fine! And it was my choice! *Mine* !" She pushes herself off the table, waving an angry finger at him. "You don't get to make

"Well, I *did*, so get over it, Granger. You may be a self-sacrificing fucking Gryffindor, and if you want to go and get yourself killed in the end, *go for it.* But not now, when--"

"You had no right! You--" She stepped forward, forgetting her foot, and cried out.

She jerks it back in reaction while the other is still in the air, and instinctively grabs Malfoy's shirt to keep herself from falling. His hands grip her elbows, pulling her up the rest of the way, and he is dizzyingly close now.

He smells of fresh air and old sweat, his head bent to look at her. She thinks if she were to push up on the toes of her foot, the fringe hanging over his forehead would brush against hers. His hands are warm and firm, and it is very silent for a very long time. His eyes are not blank, nor flashing in anger, and she doesn't know

what he is feeling, which bothers her. The muscle at the side of his jaw clenches and unclenches, and she tracks down the bone to his chin. Her gaze stays far too long on the fullness of his lips before moving up the aristocratic line of his nose, and back to look at him. He breathes out hard, his warm, warm breath following the curves of her face.

Her heart beats in hard, solid thuds, and she isn't sure if she's breathing too hard or not enough. His left hand unclenches from her elbow, ghosting up the length of her arm to grip her shoulder. It makes her aware of her own hands, one now un-fisted and splayed on his chest, with the knuckles of her other brushing against the leg of his trousers. She does not know what the moment was, but is almost positive it was something more than it had ever been. She thinks he might kiss her, or maybe just stare at her for more impossibly long seconds, and she finds her breath stuttering on the thought.

He breaks their eye contact, looking down and down. She is not sure if she imagines the second more that he looks at her mouth, because then he is simply looking through the scant space between them to the floor. His fingers tighten again at her elbow, her shoulder, and he pushes her back lightly and steps back himself.

"I'm here to take you to Potter," he rasps, clears his throat, and turns from the room.

Hermione stares at his back, a whirlwind of emotions, and is startled at what has happened for a solid five seconds before she is then startled at what he has said.

Day: 1043; Hour: 5

Harry was warm and hard, fresh from the shower, and his arms around her were suffocating in the best way possible. She mutters his name into the spot where his neck meets his shoulder, over and over again, as if to convince herself that it is honestly him.

They talk for hours, and hours more, and Hermione hates the stutters in conversation that comes with not knowing how much one can expose on different events. He looks well, fed and maybe a little tired, but nothing at all like the images in her nightmares. They catch up on their friends and acquaintances, sharing stories, and Hermione knows she is doing something akin to gossip but it is for good reason.

When they reach Malfoy, Harry stares at a spot on her shoulder. *He was out near us for something, with a few other blokes. They joined up for a bit to help us out.*

He's...different. And Hermione looks uncomfortably at the bit of dried ink on the side of her finger, and replies with an *I know.* They leave the subject, floating there in the corner of the room, with many things left unsaid, and continue on as if the revelation has never happened.

She visited with Harry until long after night had broken, and it was somewhere in her thirteenth cup of tea that he told her he must leave soon. He can't tell her where, he says, but he will be back soon enough. Hermione despises that he must leave when he's only just arrived; when the happiness and contentment of their friendship had just begun to sink in again. Though she does not crumble with the news, she is stricken with a deep sadness. Harry pulls her to him, hugging her, and whispered promises into her hair.

This will all be over soon, and we can move on. Then we'll see each other so much we'll get fed up. It's almost over, Hermione. It's so close to being over. And she doesn't know if it is she that needs to hear it as much as it is Harry who needs to be convinced.

Day: 1050; Hour: 18

Hermione passed Malfoy in a Ministry corridor, and he does not even glance at her. There have been several days of silence where she thinks of Harry, Ron, and then of Malfoy to stop herself from obsessing too much. She wasn't even sure she liked Malfoy, though she knew she did not hate him. The strange gap of seconds had been playing continuously in her head since it happened, and she still couldn't pinpoint how it made her feel. It was unexpected and weird, but there had been curiosity and intrigue in the intense span of that moment. She didn't know where she was going with Malfoy, but she *was* going somewhere.

Late at night since then, she allowed herself to wonder the possibilities of what could happen. She was drawn to Malfoy, though she couldn't explain how or why, and there was no doubt in her mind that he was attractive. His personality and attitude were seriously lacking, but...*what if* she thought, and *that* was a dangerous thought.

Hermione was a virgin, and furthermore, she was inexperienced with most intimacy. She had kissed and been kissed, and there were a few brief fondling sessions with Ron before they decided it wasn't going to work the months following sixth year. She thought rationally that it was slightly ridiculous to be in her position, and not because of personal morals or wanting to save herself for marriage, but because there hadn't been enough *time*. She would not sleep with Malfoy, because she believes in relationships, but perhaps she can *make time* for other things if it

ever happened. It was a curious thought, to wonder what Malfoy would feel like to touch her, or taste like to kiss her.

It was one she denied ever having had by the time mornings would roll around. She spent her days refusing to admit that she even wondered about him in such a sense, but alone at night, she could not help but let her mind wander.

Day: 1052; Hour: 5

Neville, an Auror, Dean, Malfoy, and she sat around a table at Grimmauld Place, studying a chart that Malfoy drew on with a bright pink marker. He does not speak to her the entire time, nor look at her. When he talked about what she must do, where she would go, he informs the room as if she were not there.

This was her first indication that something was off. The passing at the Ministry could have been put to him being busy with his thoughts, or just determined to reach his location, and indeed, it has been -- until now.

She was confused by what seemed to be ignorance of her person, but she tried not to act like she thought so, because she might be wrong.

Day: 1059; Hour: 8

It was another week before she saw him, nodding his head slightly to tell her to follow him through winding alleys. Once he felt they were safely away from the eyes of Muggles, he pulls pulled a folder from his coat and she does the same.

Her fingers flick across the edge, because he seems angry with her for no apparent reason. It had been long enough since last time, that she had briefly forgotten he had seemed so weird.

"What's--" She began her question to validate his identity, and he growled in annoyance, yanking the folder from her hand and pushing the other into her chest. She doesn't grab it immediately, and it hits the ground when he pulled his hand away.

He turns, stalking off, and she calls his name in surprise and indignation. He does not stop, waver, or reply.

Day: 1067; Hour: 15

The first time she saw him at a house, alone in the room, she managed to get out

four words before he picked up his plate and disappeared into the bedroom he was sleeping in. Anything she said to him for the next week, outside of meetings, was to his back or a scornful glare that quickly became his back.

The longer it went on, and the more times it happened, just meant the angrier she became. He never acknowledged her presence unless she made him, and when she received his attention, it was fleeting and never the kind a person would want to have. It was almost worse than it had been in the beginning, and Hermione couldn't understand *why.* She *did* know that she was very close to tearing his hair out.

Day: 1068; Hour: 12

Cho Chang shrugs her delicate shoulders, continuing to pick at her muffin as if it were a particularly nasty creature she was forced to dissect. "I know it's coming to a close. That something is going to happen. But it's not really hitting me because nothing has changed."

Hermione nods, swallowing her gulp of water. "I know, but I can still *feel* it. Everyone can. We're all jumpy, and waiting."

"It scares me," Hannah admits, jumping into the conversation she had seemed not to even hear before. "Because we're fighting, and we've done so much and gone through it all…but it doesn't matter. This was all just a prep. Like we were trying to get rid of as many as possible, all in preparation for the last battle. Because nothing matters after that. Everything we've done will mean nothing in the end."

This had always been Harry's battle, and I've known that all along, she thought to tell them. It felt too personal in the walls of her throat though, so she stays silent. Hannah was right. It comes down to Harry and Voldemort in the end, and it wouldn't matter how many battles they had, won, or lost, before that.

Sometimes, like this moment, Hermione could feel the weight of the world tip against her shoulders, and she imagined how Harry must feel. To know this information in the most personal of ways. To feel the ache of war, and know you're the only real hope of ever ending it. That an entire world's outcome waited for who spoke the words first.

Her heart shuttered, her breathing making the passages hurt. Guilt, sympathy, fear.

Day: 1070; Hour: 19

"I've entered the room, Malfoy. Isn't that your cue to scurry out?"

He scowls at the table instead, closing the notebook that has become an extension of him. Battle plans and top-secret nonsense. It was thin now, just a couple dozen pages left within the binds. The rest, used and dangerous, were burned. She recalls seeing him in the back of one of the houses once, the wind blowing yellow-lit papers around the yard and black smoke rising up to stench his clothes and hair.

If he had planned on leaving, he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction now. Which had been exactly what she wanted.

"You've been ignoring me, for some reason." He raises an eyebrow at the dark cover of the notebook, but keeps his mouth firmly shut. "More so than usual."

She puts her hands on her hips, a horribly girly stance she had adopted since she was eleven and never grew out of the habit of. She is content on getting an answer out of him, because she knows there has to be one. She had been going *somewhere* with him before he decided she dropped off into obscurity, and she needed to know *why*.

"I know it's not just some personal problem that's sprung up all of a sudden..." He seems amused by this, which brings her pause before she forges on. "Because you've been the same way you usually are with everyone else around you -- except for me."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I'm only being honest."

He stops making swirling patterns on the table and looks up at her. "I had thought my blatant ignoring of you would have sunk the message in. I don't like you, Granger. I don't like to be around you, nor speak to you, nor look at you. You seemed to be getting a little too used to the opposite of this, so I used more extensive means to sink the point home. Or, at least *try* to."

"If you didn't like me so much, you wouldn't talk to me in the first place." She didn't buy his excuse, and they both knew it. "You hated me at Hogwarts, and you still spoke to me."

"To insult you. Which, in case you haven't noticed, also happens to be what I do *now*. You, it seems, have lost sight of that."

"We have decent conversation, Malfoy, and what do you *mean* I have lost sight of that? In case *you* haven't noticed, I enjoy insulting you as well."

"You're too comfortable around me."

"What?" She was confused by what he meant to say.

He stands, tucking his notebook under his arm and moving to the sink to drop his cup in it. "When I was first around, you hardly looked at me -- and you still looked as if there were fifty wands shoved up your ass. Now, you won't stop *talking,* or invading my private space."

She snorts, raising her chin at him. "I didn't realize you wanted me to ignore and hate you as much as all the others do."

"You should have."

"Yes, you really gave it away when you talked *with* me, or didn't say anything when I was 'invading your private space', Malfoy."

"At least you've got a clue to it now then."

"Fine. Whatever, Malfoy. Go be by yourself, with no one who wants to do anything more than hex you, because you're a--"

"Don't take me on like I'm a fucking pity case, Granger," he growled, turning toward her.

She felt mean, and maybe a little reckless. "Isn't that what you *are*? The poor little son of a Death Eater, abandoned and on his own in enemy territory, no matter where he goes in the world. The little boy with big plans and ambitious dreams, who lost everything just to--"

He shoves her hard in the shoulder, his palm connecting like wood to her bone. She's forced to take a step back, but he joins her in proximity again by taking one forward. "Why is it that you're always opening your mouth when you've got no room to do so? You shut the fuck up. You don't know shit about my life, and I don't want your opinions, your thoughts, your bloody *pity.* What I *want* is for you to stay out of my face, my space, my *life.* Got it this time?"

"No," she shoots back at him, bending her head back to glare up at him. "What *I* want is for you to stop being such a coward. Why is it that you're so bothered by

someone *talking* to you? Because it's not *normal.* It's words and speech, Malfoy, it's friggen *conversation.* I don't *care* if you prefer to be alone in your depression and sinister brooding, because I'm not *going to* leave you alone."

"Why?"

She opens her mouth, moves it around air, her oxygen packed up and waiting for a release in words. "Because I don't have to, and I can damn well do what I want! If I want to talk to you, then I'm going to. If I want to go into a room where you are, then I'm *going to*. If I want to jump off a building, then I'm going to!"

"Take what you want, and sod everyone who doesn't like it, is that it?"

"When it comes to you, yes!"

He nods, slowly, something fierce and predatory on his features that made her back up when he stepped forward. She hits the wall in three steps, and he reached out, grabbing her arm and yanking her forward until she crashes into him instead. It is one, two seconds where his other hand moved, gripped her ear and yanked it, and she moves her head back to give him less room to pull. She gave a short cry in surprise and discomfort, but then he was kissing her and she had no breath to make another sound.

"Are you happy now?" He pulled back from the hard kiss to breathe the words, and then kissed her again, softer now but just as demanding.

She breathed out in short bursts from her nostrils, her heart hammering wildly, and she wasn't sure if this was *really* happening. When he moved his head, taking her bottom lip between his own, she releases a long pent up breath and curls her fingers into his shirt, kissing him back.

He made a small noise and his long fingers run up the length of her neck to cradle the back of her head in his palm. Her stomach fills and flops, and she had the ridiculous notion to cry out if her lips weren't currently occupied. The emotions inside of her are raging, and she thinks she might burst, or faint, or crumble down.

She pressed herself into him, stretching out along the length of his body, and thought perhaps this was a bad idea, but she does not care at all. His hand lowers from its previous grip on her shoulder, the tips of his fingers ghosting down her arm to her side, and he wraps his arm around her. His fingers are bent into his palm, his hand a fist at her hip, and he brushes his knuckles against her. They press harder into her, the muscles clenching in his arm and drawing her tighter to him when she

opens her mouth to his tongue. She flicks the tip with her own, curling around it before following him back into his mouth. He tastes of orange juice and himself, the roof of his mouth cold and his tongue hot.

The kiss is slightly sloppy in the tint of desperation that seems to have flooded them both, because they both seem to realize that it will only last so long before reality kicked back in. They chase it away with heat, and touch, and breathy little noises, but time will bring it back. It is feverish, passionate, and mind numbing; it was the best she had felt in a very long time.

Her fingers curled into his hair, and he pulled back fractionally, his words more air and rasp than anything solid. "Is this what you want, Granger? Hmm? Should I just take this?"

"If you want," she whispers, though she won't be able to recall what it is she replied with later. He bends his head at the answer, and she pushes up on her toes, meeting him halfway to kiss him again.

Later, gasping for breath, both red and lipped-swollen, he will drop away from her quickly. There will be a pause of settling down, of awkwardness, and he will turn to leave before she can find something to say. *Is this why you were mad?* She'll ask. He'll only smirk and give her an answer that isn't an answer, *I wasn't mad*, before walking away.

Day: 1071; Hour: 18

She makes to sit in the recliner before telling herself she should have a little more bravery, and sits beside him instead. She hasn't been near him since yesterday, and she didn't know where he had gone all that day. It is the house she stays in when she must deliver messages though, and so she figured he might have had an errand.

He doesn't say anything to her when she sat on the other side of the couch, and didn't acknowledge her at all. She tried to be normal, to watch the television as she had done with him before, but she was suddenly made of nerves and sweaty hands.

It's was an hour before acknowledged her, and she jumped when she turned her eyes toward him to find him looking back at her. He raises an eyebrow at her in question or thought, and hands her the remote.

"You never give up the remote."

"Unless I'm going to bed." Same caustic tone, same insulting expression.

He pushes to his feet, leaving the room, and Hermione blinks at the darkened hall that he disappeared down. She wasn't sure how to handle the situation. She had never been in such a place. Sure, she had been at the beginning stages of a relationship with Ron, and a short possible one with a Muggle boy who lived down her street. But she didn't know if she was starting such a thing with Malfoy, and to top it off, it was *Malfoy*. She still called him by his last name, for God's sake. She had never met a boy like him, let alone being involved with one like him to any degree.

Ron would have taken her hand, or scooted closer, or started a light conversation with flirtation. Malfoy had just…sat there, and watched TV.

She had, of course, run over what she had been doing thirty million times in her head since he kissed her. She thought about it despite the fact that every time she does, she tells herself not to. She wanted to go with what was happening for the first time in her life, and she just didn't want to think about why it was a bad idea, or all the repercussions.

Perhaps the reason she was in her twenties and still a virgin was because she didn't take many chances in her life. She didn't know if Draco Malfoy should be one of these chances, but what is regret? It is something that happens in the past, and that life moves on from. She can move on from Malfoy if she wanted to, at any time. No one had to know. It was just…

Well, who knows what it was, because she sure doesn't.

She isn't attached, so he can't hurt her. It is a means to break time, to explore different things, to get to know the feeling that welled up and overtook her when they kissed. She may be behaving recklessly, dangerously, and against all the wishes her friends would make upon her, but she has done that throughout her life except when it came to boys. *It's an experiment,* she tells herself. *Like research. Or something.* Because he makes her feel like she has never felt before, and there is more of a demand in her to explore that, than to turn against it. Just this once, she thinks. Just to give up on that tightrope she tries to keep herself walking on all the time.

If it happens, it happens. She will not push for it, and if it started to feel like she should push against it, she will.

Eight

Day: 1073; Hour: 13

He was infuriating, and she wondered if he was doing it on purpose. She had analyzed everything over the past few days, from the way he looked at her, to the tone of his voice, to his body language. She had been looking for clues to try and decide just what he was feeling, or what he thought, but he didn't give her any that she could take for fact. She was beginning to think the random moment in the kitchen was simply a one-time deal, a simple lapse of sanity, and that perhaps she should forget about the whole thing.

Except she couldn't. She had been kissed before, many times, but couldn't drag a memory of feeling up quite like the one she had experienced with him. She wasn't sure if it was because of how he kissed her, or if it was just because of who he was - who *she* was. There was something very wrong about it, but exciting all the same, and she *liked* it. Malfoy was a mystery, and she had no idea if that was because he liked to be, he didn't want anything to do with her, or if he was just using this as a way to annoy her. All three were likely.

The funny thing about those rare situations where two people block one another's route, and then try to sidestep each other by going in the same direction, was that you knew exactly what was happening but couldn't stop. Hermione *knew* when she stepped to the right that he would as well, and she knew he would go to the left after, but she still went to the left herself. They repeated the routine once more before he stood still and glowered down at her, and Hermione - who had come to think he was doing everything with the purpose to annoy her - stood still and glared back up at him.

"Do I have to move you myself?"

"You could easily move *yourself*, let me by, and then continue on your way."

"Are you always this immature?"

"Do you always think the world has to bend to your way?" she snaps back.

"Ridiculous," he mutters lowly, braces a hand on her hip, and pushes her aside as he moves forward.

She glares and pulls his hand off, and maybe she holds onto his hand a few seconds longer than needed, but he doesn't pull it away either. She makes her way to her teacup, her senses busy trying to track his location behind her, but the back door clicks and then she is alone.

Day: 1079; Hour: 10

"Oh, God," she breathes, his lips on her neck. He moves back to the spot that caused the words to slip, sucking harder, nipping her with his teeth.

It had been one week since they first kissed, and when he turned from the bathroom door and bumped into her, she suddenly couldn't control her reaction. She has been a bundle of nerves since last week, waiting for something to happen when nothing had. By the way he was kissing her back now, and all over her, she thinks that maybe he hadn't lost interest, but instead had been waiting for this. For her to make the move this time.

He is almost too much for her to handle. She had never felt so out of control and devoured by another person with just kissing, and it made her dizzy. Later, she will be nervous that he could cause such volatile reactions from her.

He has kept his hands on the decent parts of her as of yet, but his hand is creeping up along her ribs now, the fingertips on the other skimming along her waistband, and she wasn't sure how to feel about it. Hermione didn't think she was ready to let him touch her so intimately, and the unsure feelings made her pull away.

His eyes were dark, mouth swollen, cheeks flushed. He looked at her in a way that she cannot recall a person ever doing before, and it caused her stomach to twist and her breath to catch. His hand is fisted in her shirt at the back, but he doesn't pull her back, waiting and watching for her to do what she wants.

Okay, she thinks. *Okay.*

And she's kissing him again, pushing herself back into him so much that he staggers a step. He found a balance of their weight against the wall, and so she leaned fully against him, pushing all of her into him. She felt his hardness against her stomach, and breathes out harshly into his mouth, her eyes opening at the feel of it. She didn't know why she did not expect it, and it made her nervous, yet blows an overwhelming feeling through her of...pride? Power? Something she can't name, but that makes her keep kissing him despite it all. He cups her behind, pressing her pelvis closer to his, and she is equally startled by both their moans of

acknowledgment.

She is turned on, uncomfortably wet against her knickers, and the feeling only increases when he squeezes her backside, thrusting against her stomach. Her heart pounds painfully, and she forces herself with more strength than she thought she could need, to pull herself away from him again. She desperately *wanted* him, and this scared her too much for her to stay, because this was not where she planned on going with him.

"I have to…to make dinner. Yes. Dinner. Food… I'm…hungry." He furrows and then raises his eyebrows at her, just as out of breath as she, as she stumbled over the words and blushes hot red.

She mentally berated herself all the way to the kitchen, and must lean against the counter for several minutes to compose herself.

Day: 1084; Hour: 18

"Dean!" He has the decency to look abashed.

"It won't stop."

"*He*," Hermione corrects, and when she goes to stop the house-elf currently content on bashing his head in, Dean stops her.

"It-- *He* bites."

"*Stupify*!" She catches the elf as he falls, not wanting him to have any more injuries than he already will.

"Should we bring him back? Some Veritaserum, and I figure he'll speak up about his Masters at least."

"I don't see why not," Hermione murmured with a shrug.

Day: 1085; Hour: 1

"It is *illegal*." Moody smashes his fist off his desk, and Hermione, Dean, Cho, and Justin flinch back in reply.

"We weren't aware of that. We thought it was perfectly fine to bring in someone for questioning when they likely held knowledge of Death Eater activity." Cho tries,

and Moody turns his beet red face toward her.

"It's not someone! It's a house-elf! It's *property.* Now, we have charges brought against the four of you from Crabbe Senior, for *stealing.*"

"But he's a Death--"

"That doesn't matter. He is not proven, nor convicted, of being a Death Eater. He lent his friend, who he assured us he had no idea was a Voldemort follower, his house-elf, and wants action taken against you all for stealing his property."

"How does he know it was us?"

"He doesn't, but the Ministry does."

"But sir, we only brought him in for questioning, which is legal--"

"Under a *Stupefy?* I think not, Granger," Moody snaps. "Furthermore, house-elves are not considered people, but possessions. They cannot leave the property without permission from their owner."

"So, what is he going to do?" Justin shrugs. "Sue us? Who cares."

"You should care! The Ministry already holds a low public opinion for not 'handling the war properly', and are not at all pleased that Crabbe Senior is bound to release this to the press. Screwing up is not want we want in the papers with low public support! Furthermore, you went against the conduct book, committed an illegal act, and upset that fucking house-elf so much he cracked his skull enough to warrant ongoing medical treatment!"

"But, sir--"

"Suspension."

"*What*?" their four voices rose, enraged.

"One week suspension unless further notice. Get out of my office."

"Sir, you can't be serious! We--" Hermione tries, and Moody slams his fist again.

"Out!"

Hermione can't even find it within herself to be pleased when she finds Ginny on the other side of the door.

Day: 1091; Hour: 12

Hermione still has one day left until the end of her suspension, but the mission Malfoy planned is in two, and this is why she found herself sitting in the meeting room anyway.

"So I go in with Hermione?"

"No, Weasley. *Again*, you're with Finnigan," Malfoy snaps, angry and impatient that Ginny and Colin both don't seem to be grasping his plan.

"Oh."

"So everyone has it?" He waits a second. "Good. And do me a favor -- don't take anything home with you unless you run it by me."

He looks at her for his last sentence, and she turns red and glowers at him. She had expected him to be nicer, or different to her somehow. But despite the fact that she kissed him again just that morning, or the way he brushed against her when he moved past her into the room, he still made sure to embarrass and anger her now. He had been the same since the very beginning, and had not adopted a sweet demeanor like Ron and the Muggle boy both had.

She practically stormed out of the room, angry at her own failure, and at him for pointing it out.

Day: 1100; Hour: 12

She had not seen him in over a week, but his mouth was just as hot and demanding as she remembered it. He had only been kissing her for twenty seconds, but the danger was more pressing than anything else. The house was full tonight with Aurors and her friends, and she does not want anyone to walk out and find them in the dark of the hallway.

"You were an utter prat last week."

"I'm always an asshole, Granger," he whispers back, attacking her mouth again.

She *humphs* her confirmation, kissing him for a second more before pushing him

away. She left before the awkwardness that always comes when they realize whom they both are and what they are doing can set itself in.

Day: 1103; Hour: 17

"Chocolate is overrated."

"*Wha*'?" Neville asks around his current mouthful, aiming a disbelieving look at her.

"It is. I mean, there are some kinds that are lovely to eat once in a while, but... I don't understand how people can love it so much."

"You drink a cup of cocoa almost every night before bed. Or you used to, anyway."

"Hot chocolate is different."

"It's still chocolate."

"But it's not the same as *eating* it. The only good chocolate I can eat is this kind a woman makes near my parents' practice. It's--"

"Oh! I remember that. You brought that in during fifth year, after the summer holiday."

Hermione smiles nostalgically, nodding. "I can't wait to get home."

"Mm. Me too. I was just talking to Seamus about that. He said it didn't matter to him, because he doesn't really have a home. He said he doesn't feel like he completely belongs anywhere."

Malfoy makes a sound at this, likely because Seamus pales in comparison to how Malfoy must feel about the same matter. Hermione looks at him for a moment and then back to Neville. "That's sad."

"Yeah. He said he's taking up belief in that idea Luna had always been going on about."

"That no one has a home?"

"Yeah, and that they find homes in other people. Which is where our need for

personal connection comes from, as well as loyalty. You don't burn your own house down unless there's no other option -- that's what she said, remember?"

Hermione nods and smirks. "As well as that we're all descendants of gypsies, which is why we feel we have to connect with people rather than place."

"She was on to something though. If I was sitting here alone, I would feel a lot more out of place than I do with you here. You make it a little more like home, you know? I can relax more."

Hermione smiles sweetly at him, ignoring the amused look on Malfoy's face. "Thank you, Neville. I'm glad. You do the same for me. All my friends do, really."

"Is this Gryffindor mating season?" Neville blushes and Hermione glares. "Am I intruding? Should I give you two a moment alone, or will you just head off to the bedroom now?"

"Actually, I should go clean up that room. I trashed it a little too much last night." Neville stands, uncomfortable, the red just starting to fade from his cheek. Hermione was going to comment on being dysfunctional under the influence of so much alcohol last night, but changes her mind.

"I'll go with you." She wants to finish the conversation, and helping him clean is something more to do than sitting there.

She fully expects a snide comment from Malfoy at their escape to the bedroom, but when she glances over her shoulder toward him, she's only met with a steely glare to both their backs.

Day: 1104; Hour: 20

"Are you with anyone else?" There's no TV in front of the couch, so he stares out the window instead. She almost thinks it's a normal question before she pays attention to the heat behind the words.

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I don't want Gryffindor dick in my mouth every time I go near you." She scrunches her face in disgust, the words vulgar and disgusting.

"You sleep with other people, Malfoy, so I fail to see how it matters." Though, the last time she knew of was months ago, it didn't mean he wasn't.

"Just answer the question, Granger."

"Answer mine."

He shakes his head, fed up, and moves from the room without looking at her.

Day: 1109; Hour: 4

Malfoy presses against her back to retrieve a parchment from the stack in front of her. It's the first contact they've made in days, and when she pushes herself back, she tells herself it's an automatic reaction, rather than anything to do with the sudden flip of her stomach.

Day: 1116; Hour: 7

The breakfast Lavender places in front of her is slightly scary when thought of in an about-to-digest manner. Lupin had positively insisted on making breakfast for everyone that morning when they had all seemed to roll out of bed before nine; Lavender had refused not to be of assistance.

"It looks good, Lav," Hermione manages, and glares at Dean smiling like a fool at her.

She picks up her fork and scoots back in her chair, preparing herself, when her foot scuffs against something. She looks up across from her, Malfoy's eyes darting from the table and to hers. She looks back down at her plate the second he meets her eyes, but keeps her foot next to his to annoy him or feed her own sudden want to have it there -- she denied the latter and sticks to the former. He does not move his own back, which is stretched out into her area to begin with, and if she concentrates hard enough, she can feel the warmth radiating from him. She wonders briefly if his socks match today.

She had told herself several times that it doesn't bother her that Malfoy seemed to be content on stopping whatever had started. But there are times when she catches him looking at her that she thinks perhaps it isn't exactly over just yet. She knows all she likely has to do is tell him, no, that she isn't seeing, or kissing, or sleeping with anyone. She was never one to give in though, and refused to tell him until he shows her why it's so important he knows -- or that he is definitely not doing anything with anyone either. Because that she could understand. Lavender herself didn't sleep with anyone when she had a continuous lover; Hermione may not know the rules to this sort of game, but she picks up on things around her easily enough to get the idea.

It is very strange, her slight fascination with Malfoy. She thinks if he made her feel any less than he managed to, she would not bother. But the feelings he brought up in her were new and intense, and though they would have to stop somewhere, she hasn't been quite ready for them to now.

She will though, if that is what he wants. She would not put herself out to him like a girl desperate for his attention, or who is needy of him, or any other ridiculous notion he could reach, if she were to try to kiss him again. If he wants to, he can come to her. If he doesn't, she refuses to let herself care about it.

Day: 1118; Hour: 16

"What's up with you and Malfoy?" Lavender had rudely burst into the bathroom while Hermione was showering, and was currently primping herself in the mirror while Hermione counts to the seconds until she leaves.

"*What*?" She squeezes the soap too hard in her hand and it jets out, smacking off the shower wall.

"You're always staring at one another. He was eyeing you from the hallway and all the way to the bathroom just before."

"We hate one another. It--"

"It doesn't look like hate. It looks like a bit of sexual tension."

"Don't get any ideas, Lavender. Shagging Malfoy is something you only do," Hermione snaps, and it's too harsh and too mean, but she can't help it. Her heart is pounding, her throat dry, and her bones feel shaky under the weight of possibility that comes with being found out -- even if it isn't something she was doing anymore.

Lavender pauses for a length of time, and when she speaks, her voice is crisp. "I've only done it twice, Hermione, and I would never do it again. With Malfoy, there's not even a single second where it doesn't feel like he's not just using you to get off. I've never felt so dirty."

Hermione tries not to think about her words right now, or the strange emotion that bubbles up at the bottom of her gut at the thought of Lavender and Malfoy. "You did it twice--"

"I thought it would be different. Look, don't judge me, Hermione, alright? I don't judge you, and I wouldn't, so don't."

Lavender is angry, hurt, but the door shuts with a click instead of a bang.

Day: 1119; Hour: 20

"You have to stop staring at me."

"Excuse me?"

"Lavender thinks something is going on because you keep staring at me," Hermione repeats, explaining more, and ignores the mention of her staring back.

Malfoy is not so quick to ignore it however. "The fact that she hasn't seen *you* staring is quite surprising, considering you are far less covert than I am."

"Fine," she blushes. "We'll both stop staring. Alright?"

He stares back at her as an answer, and her blush grows heavier. He places his notebook beside him on the couch and stands, his path to her a slow swagger. "What if I don't want to?"

"Want to what?" she asked, because her mind had suddenly dislocated from knowledge and common sense.

"*Stop staring*, Granger."

"Well…well, you have to," she mutters quickly, her breathing odd as he closes in more.

"I don't believe I like to be told what to do."

"Oh well," she tries, pressing her hand to her chest to calm her heartbeat, and dropping it away when he notices.

"What if I refuse? What are you going to do?"

"I'll hex out your eyeballs." She huffs, flustered, placing her hands on her hips to try and draw up more of her bossiness. He smirks, stopping inches from her, and she refuses to budge back.

"I don't think you can stop either, Granger. I don't think you *want* to," he whispers, his finger skimming over her arm, elbow, down to trace her wrist. "Want to know why?"

"Why?" she breathes, trying to remain indignant.

His hand finds her hip, closes around it, and she can just feel the pressure of his strength as he starts to pull her toward him when a crash sounds from the living room. They both jump, staring through the dining room and into the dim lit hall.

"Lavender?"

"Yeah?" her voice echoes back, followed by her footsteps as she appears in the hall and walks down toward them. She eyes them both suspiciously, despite that Malfoy's hand has dropped away, and Hermione realizes it's time to step back from the overwhelming heat of him.

"What happened?"

"I can't find my heels."

"Oh."

The three of them stand, the air thick. "Are you sure you don't know how to cook, Granger?"

Malfoy's voice is a mutter, and he clears his throat after, as if knowing it was too low to sound like he hadn't just come up with it. Lavender looks back to Hermione after her scan of Malfoy's person, and waits for the reply, likely still trying to figure out what she interrupted.

"Of course I know how to cook, Malfoy." He sends her a withering look and she rushes on. "I just won't cook for *you*."

"Fine," he scowls. "I wasn't up for being poisoned anyway."

Hermione rolls her eyes, blushing hard because she wanted to be an actress when she was younger, but she was horrible at lying. Well, she was good rather good at it actually, but not when it came to doing it to her friends. Malfoy moves past her, his arm brushing hers; Hermione thinks the action will give them away more, but he turns instead, throwing off Lavender with an insult.

"I would ask you, Brown, but I've already seen the horror you create."

She gives him a nasty look and turns, retreating back to the living room. Hermione waits until the room is clear before being able to breathe again.

Day: 1128; Hour: 9

It was a little awkward, her lying beneath him, his body resting against hers in all these areas. He had never touched her there before, even if it is just her leg, and her stomach, and all these spots that aren't even all that private. She can feel the motions of his bones, the pull of his muscles in his thigh and calf as he shifts. She can feel the wrinkles of his clothes, and the sound the rough fabric makes against her own. It feels so strange that this is a man, and this is Draco, and he was here, on top of her. She catches herself thinking back to how they got here, but stops, because that was no longer important.

His fingers tap down her arm, and they are stiff digits against her own, cold from the open window and calloused from war. He skims the pads in arks over her palms, up her fingers, and then down to slot themselves with hers. The room is silent except for the scratch of their clothing and the sound of their breathing, and it's almost painful, that silence. All that expectation and hesitation. Everything is slow and unsure, but still deemed necessary because it was what they want.

Though she doesn't want *this*, exactly. She would prefer to lay with him, and touch him maybe, but she does not want to have sex with him. In her head, she can see the faces of the people he has taken to his different beds before. Can remember the scent of sex on him when he sat beside her on worn couches. She doesn't want to be one of *those* girls. She does not want to be the one unwelcome when she wakes, or who had to sit in the drowning air when he ignored her at dinner. She wanted him to be an escape, but he always had been, and she does not think it had to be like this for him either.

"I..." His lips are still on her neck, where they had attached themselves twenty minutes ago when he grabbed her from the living room unexpectedly. He waits as if he knew this would happen all along. "I don't...I mean, I want to be here, and... But, I can't... I'm..."

She takes a deep breath to just shoot out what it is she means to say, but he raises his head, and the motion pauses her. His hand leaves hers, and he pushes himself up on his other arm, farther and farther above her until she is sure he will leave. He touches her face instead, and doesn't meet her eyes the whole time he looks at her.

"Can I touch you?" he whispers, hushed and deep, and when he breathes in, his stomach presses against her own flutter-filled one.

She licks her lips, stares up at his hooded eyes, and nods her head. He continues

touching her face, looking lost enough to make her think he hadn't noticed her response. So she speaks her confirmation, and it makes him smile just a little. He probably thinks she's impatient for him to know.

Those roughened fingertips trail her jaw, her neck, to the line of her shirt, and down to her breast. He curves with the curve of them, like a ghost, or wind against the fabric.

"Here? Can I touch you here?"

"Yes," she whispers back, holds her breath in wait.

He lifts the whole weight of it in his palm, and she gasps just a little at the unexpected sensation of it. His hips move at the sound of her response, and she feels heat and hardness against her thigh. It makes him less patient, and he's quick to move his hand under her shirt, push under her bra, and cup her skin-to-skin.

She almost closes her eyes, but knows that she does not wish to miss any of this, or the very concentrated expression on his face as he watches his hand move beneath her shirt. She reaches up, hesitant, and touches the softness of his hair. He doesn't seem to react at all, so she only stays a moment longer before inching down toward his face. He shuts his eyes when she runs her fingers over them, and keeps them shut while she explores all those lines and features she had studied by sight for so long. It is his birthday today, and she tries to count the years on his face, but does not find them. His breath is warm on her fingers when she finally gets up the nerve to touch his lips, and his hand slides down her stomach when he takes her index finger into his mouth. She blushes, imagining it tastes like salt and soap, but he just continues swirling his tongue around it.

She starts when she feels his fingers sliding past the waist of her jeans and underwear, skimming and roaming against the soft skin at the bottom of her stomach. His eyes open at her jerk of movement, and he pulls his head back to get her finger out of his mouth when she made no motion to do it herself.

"Here?" She swallows, nods her response to his question, and his hand dips even further.

The angle is strange, and he looks slightly uncomfortable with it. Hermione reaches down numb fingers and struggles with her button. He looks her in the eyes the entire time, and it's almost unnerving how he has decided to do it now and avoided them at all cost before. She likes him doing it though, and doesn't look away, even when he pushes his hand down farther.

"Is this okay?" His finger skims her *there,* pushing deeper with a pass, until he hits the spot that makes her hips buck up against him.

She's already breathing fast and stilted, and his eyes don't stray for a second. "Y-yes. Yes, this is okay."

It is better than okay, actually. It is the best she had felt in a very long time, but she will feel stupid saying that out loud. He swirls the pad of his finger around and around, making her clutch his shirt at the shoulders, and thrust her hips every time he flicks his finger across her clit. His hips jerk back in reaction, and by the time he's thrusting a finger, two, inside of her, he's built a rhythm against her leg.

She curls her hand around the back of his neck, tugging periodically to try and get him to kiss her, but he doesn't. When she thinks about it, her body feels hot and her lips cold, aching for his attention. He hasn't kissed her since before their temporary stop, weeks and weeks ago. He keeps her fairly busy thinking about something else or nothing at all though, and for the first time in her life when the boys didn't get her drunk or that time she attacked the very man hovering over her, she feels very out of control. He could do whatever he wanted to her - could have torn off their clothes and taken her - and she would not care. Would welcome it, in fact.

The heat is sweltering up along her bones, and she is fucking his hand now, in a way that will embarrass her later. His breath is heavy, his pupils dilated, and his face flushed. She is close, *close, close, close,* and he pulls back. Slows it down, pauses, takes his time to still his hand and stare down at her, rolling his hips in circles against her. It makes her realize her situation, and that while he is all over her; she has been staying in the same spot. She becomes a little awkward, unsure of where to put her hands and what to do with them, but then his thumb swipes her clit and she forgets. It draws her attention fully back onto him now, and she realizes that had been the point, his expression a little petulant that her thoughts had wandered.

Her hands explore his shoulders, his back, as much of his chest as she can reach; though she was disappointed his shirt was still on. His fingers begin to move again, in slow, deliberate motions, and her hands are curled back into that hated fabric all over again. He brings her to the edge, pulls back, to the edge, back again. She is practically sobbing with want and need, and her blood is a living, angry beast inside of her. Pounding and throbbing, and all she wanted was to explode. That was *all* she wanted. Her mind was gone, and now there was only him and sensation, and absolutely nothing else.

"I'm going to make you come so hard, Granger. I'm going to make you come *so. Fucking. Hard.*" He whispers this harshly against her forehead, trails his lips over her sweat.

He pushes his face into her neck, his tongue licking and flicking, his mouth sucking. He tastes the fierceness of her heartbeat, the vibration of her moans for him. His hips speed up, and his fingers follow, until she is crying out a plea for him to let her go, but it only sounds like noise and whimpers. She clutches his head to her, shifting her leg and making him groan loudly into her skin. He nips her neck, laves it, and then just breathes hot and hard, slipping sweaty against her own sweat.

He is almost undone, and so she knows he will let her come now. Her fingertips dig into his upper arms with the thought, and his hips speed up in reply. His thumb brushes her clit over and over, his fingers curving and making her cry out. The pressure is hard and tight against her skin, throbbing sensation at her core, in her thighs, her womb. There is a breath, a gasp of air that burns her lungs, and then her hips jerking violently up into him before she falls apart.

She was gone. Unaware of anything but the way she felt, and the explosion inside of her. The world black, her breath paused, and the *feeling* was *overwhelming*. There exists no world, or war, or sky, or bed. Only this place of balance between nowhere and him, and the way he has just made her feel. There was only that now.

She was slammed back into reality as if she had been floating and had fallen back onto the bed. She is still left uncaring of this fact though, and of absolutely anything but the need to breathe and drink in the last of how she felt. Her body was tingling, her mind reeling, as she panted and gulped for air. She was only dimly aware of her surroundings at first, and then he works his way back into her state of awareness.

He is heavy, and a beautiful burden against her body. He's fighting for breath as well, probably finding it humid in the spot between her neck and the bed. His fingers are still buried inside of her, his hair sticking to the side of her face.

Her arms are weak when she wraps them around him, and it takes him a few seconds before he slowly removes his fingers from her. He leaves a wet trail over her stomach, and then his hand leaves her all together. His body shifts back and forth, and then his hand was back, pressing against her ribs.

It is only when her breathing catches up to itself, and his evens out as well, that she begins to think about what she was supposed to do now. She knows he doesn't like to lie beside the girls he sleeps with, or in this case just does something sexual

with, and she isn't sure if she wants to be the silly, naive girl who thinks that preference doesn't include her as well.

He rolls off her, taking the majority of the heat with him. The silence spoils the air again, but it is different than the first. This is even more awkward, more filled with tension. Perhaps it's all in her head though, because she knows she imagines things like that to be there when it's just inside herself.

She thinks of telling him about her predicament, of asking him what he wants her to do, but was already blushing at the thought of it. Instead, she resigns herself to not be the sort of girl she has always felt the most pity for, and refuses for him to leave her behind here or kick her out like he has all the others.

So, she buttons her pants and tugs her shirt down, blinks at the ceiling, and realizes she has no idea what to say.

"Thank you." Was what came out, and she thought it's probably the very worst thing to say after a thing like that, and to him.

She's hot red, mentally berating herself as she pushes herself up and out of his surroundings. He is silent, but she can feel his eyes, like something physical against her skin, all the way to the door.

She shuts it quietly behind her, and does her very best not to pound her feet to the same tune of her thrumming heart, and all out run to the bathroom and the privacy of her room.

Day: 1129; Hour: 3

She tried not to look at him over lunch, because she felt as if someone had given her a different set of bones in her sleep; shaped the same, but not *hers*, and she was left finding out what feels the same and what was different.

She thinks that she was meant to act as if nothing has happened at all, because that is all that she has seen from everyone else. However, something *had* happened, and she knows that she can't ignore that since the moment he walks into the kitchen.

She's blushing down at her eggs, and hates it, because she does it too often around him. She can't help but remember yesterday though; the way she lost control over herself, the embarrassing way in which she moved against him, her quick rush from the room, and her parting *thanks*. He must think her a shy little virgin, which

she was, but it wasn't something she wanted him to think. He might even be looking at her as one might a used napkin -- served its purpose, and was now trash-worthy. She had never been so unsure about how to act before, and she does not stop hating it for a single second. She glances up at him, his back to her as he rummages through the fridge, and wonders if he looks at her like they all look at Lavender -- like *he* looks at Lavender. A girl willing to spread her legs with close to no incentive.

Can I touch you here? She remembers that as a constant loop of sound in her head all night, and the flush of his cheeks after he, she guesses, came in his trousers.

No, she should have said, and given at least some pretense of not being so willing to commit so far to something that was not much of anything at all. But she remembers the press of his body, the heat of his skin, the feel of his touch, and does not think she can regret it just yet.

"I thought you said no more staring?" She looks up from his stomach, darting from her thoughts, and stares up at him much like a bird in Arthur Weasley's headlights.

"Huh?" But she registers what he said, turning red and looking back down at her plate. "I was thinking."

"Oh?" His tone was nothing less than suggestive, and she rubs at her face to calm the color down. "You're oversized brain is going to explode one of these days, Granger."

"That insult is wildly overused and lame, Malfoy," she shot back.

"Considering your 'witty' arsenal, I can understand why you would be able to recognize it for so."

"Yes, it does take a bit of brilliance to recognize things that are lacking in such." She means her own brilliance for recognizing his own lackluster comebacks, but he twists her words and takes it as if she had meant *his* own brilliance for recognizing *hers*.

"Why," he ducks his head forward, smirking, "*thank you*."

She flushes *again* from the reminder of her parting words, and he walks with his usual swagger from the room. But it's different now then when he had first walked in, now something close to normal.

Day: 1133; Hour: 12

"So, I happened to hear you were cheating on your lifelong love Ron Weasley with an Auror named Dennis. Who you happen to have nicknamed Dennis the Menace, stolen from a Muggle movie about some crafty little kid, because of your Dennis' lean toward masochism and sodomy in sex. Which you happen to have like rabbits."

Hermione blinks long and slow at Justin, who stood rather amused at the other side of the table. It took her several seconds to process the new gossip circulating about her, and the remaining time from there until she spoke was acknowledging -- quite uncomfortably -- the people who had turned to stare at her. Malfoy, of course, included.

"The rumor mill seems to have been in the need for something scandalizing then, huh?"

"Oh, no denial?" Justin smiles, taking his seat.

"Dennis and I like to keep our private lives just that." Hermione rolls her eyes, and her remark is greeted with several different reactions -- laughter from those that know her. She decides to clarify for those who don't get the joke. "Do we even *have* an Auror named Dennis?"

"Well, supposedly, you have him every night." Dean winks at her.

"God." She rubs at her face; she can't even talk sex with her girlfriends let alone a room mostly filled with males. "To clarify, I'm not seeing anyone. I don't know how that rumor started, or *who* started it, but it's rubbish."

She looks toward Lavender, the heart of most gossip when it came to making it with her personal life or spreading it. The girl she had aggravating in the bathroom a few short weeks ago, and who was likely the culprit behind it. Nothing too offensive, nothing damaging, but just enough to embarrass her.

"Oh, so you're single?" Seamus leers at her. "You can nickname me anything you want."

"Small Penis Seamus." Angelina cuts in, and most the table laughs much to said man's chagrin.

"The One Hitter Quitter of Ireland."

"The--"

"Oh, piss off, all of you," Seamus barks, looking back to her. "I think Hermione knows that making her own assessments is a very--"

"Hate to interrupt the pathetically sad Gryffindor tactics of seduction, but there's a meeting to be held. If you want to shag Granger, Finnigan, try it on your own fucking time."

Everyone's head turns toward the cold drawl at the side of the room; silence falling faster than their noise level had risen. The blond looks less than pleased at their idea of a meeting, and gestures stiffly toward his left. Neville stands quickly, nearly knocking his chair back in his rush to carry on before a fight can erupt between the two stubborn men.

Hermione keeps her eyes on Malfoy, watching his fist clench and unclench from his other side. He meets her eyes temporarily as he takes his seat again before returning his attention to Neville.

Day: 1133; Hour: 20

"Hey." Neville smiles, accepting the hot chocolate she holds out toward him.

"That really is a fantastic plan, Neville," Hermione tells him again, touching the other mug to Malfoy's arm when he fails to see her holding it toward him.

He turns, surprised, and stares at it for a second before wrapping his large hand around the base. His fingers brush her wrist and she looks up from his hand to meet his eyes.

"Thanks. It really just hit me. I don't know."

"What are you guys doing out here?" Dean speaks through the screen.

"We're starting a campfire to sing songs around it and roast marshmallows." He stared at her until he was sure she was joking.

"Seamus and I tried that once over the summer. We set a tree on fire." Hermione and Neville laugh as Dean joins them on the porch, pulling himself up on the railing. He pats the spot next to him and Hermione pulls herself up as well.

"I've still beat you by almost burning down the Potions lab."

"Eight times." Hermione smiles.

"Eleven," Malfoy adds, his voice distant.

"Eleven," Neville agrees with a laugh and a shrug.

Dean looks at Malfoy for a long moment, deciding on something. "I heard the Cannons beat the Caerphilly Catapults, Malfoy. As I remember, the Catapults were your favorite."

He gives a short, fake laugh. "Maybe before Danitz joined up, or they hired that cocky bastard Donavan as seeker. Once Markis dropped to second line from that Barrel Spin last year, it all went to hell."

Hermione sighs, glancing at Neville to share in her pain. There is nothing more common ground for most men than Quidditch, and despite that she is glad Dean took a bit of a jump, Quidditch talk is something she will never miss.

Light conversation kept the four of them busy until long after the last sip of cocoa in her cup had gone freezing cold. The sun had set and gone, the world dark blue, and Neville had retired for the night shortly after Dean. Hermione is left sitting on the railing, facing the house and counting the moths around the porch light. Malfoy was silent to her right, arms still braced against the railing and staring off at something she will never see.

"You know, I was honest at the meeting." She closes her eyes, blushing at her embarrassment, but it had been something she thought so much about saying, that it blurted its self out. She had been going back and forth over the idea if Malfoy would even still care, but she guessed she will find out now.

His clothes rustle, and the old wood of the railing squeaks as he adjusts his weight. "About the plan?"

"About not seeing anyone."

The touch of his fingertips to her knees was what had her snapping her eyes open. She had thought she would be able to hear him if he moved from his spot, but he was quieter than she has given him credit for. He was almost always more than what she thought.

"Not anyone?"

"Well…you…I guess, sort of…in…a way. Or whatever." She finishes lamely, rolling her eyes up toward the sky and shaking her head at herself.

She can't see his response, his face bent toward her legs as he pauses for a second. He places his palms over her kneecaps then, applying pressure to part her legs just a little more, and steps into the width as soon as there was room to do so. She was even with his face this way, despite that she had been taller than Dean and Neville when they stood next to her when she sat here. At times she forgets just how tall Malfoy is until she's standing in close proximity with him.

He watches his fingers climb up her leg, over the tightly clenched fingers of her hand on the railing, then trail up her arm. He sets them on a path over her shoulder, up her neck, skirting around her throat and along her jaw. His nail traces the curve at the bottom of her lower lip, and this was when he looked up at her finally. He was warmth, and she was something she can't describe but likes all the same. He has left goosebumps in the wake of his touch, and coupled with the coolness of night, she leans in toward him. His breath is warmth across her cheek as he looks away from her eyes again, setting a trail up her chin, her cheek, to her temple.

"You are the most stubborn girl I've ever known."

"Which clashes horribly with your own stubbornness," she whispers back, the moment frail and strange.

"Indeed." He smirks, weaving down her forehead, along the planes of her nose, and dipping to her lips again.

"We clash horribly all together."

He shrugs a shoulder, gripping her chin and tilting her head. "I haven't decided on this part just yet."

He tastes of cocoa when he claims her mouth for the first time in months. Her hands automatically reach for his shoulders, and when she wobbles dangerously on the rail, he wraps an arm around her back to tug her against him. She does not wrap her legs around him, though she will think she should have later, but clenches them tightly at his sides. She had nearly forgotten how much she liked to kiss Draco Malfoy, but he reminds her without reserve, content on leaving her breathless and numb, with her insides bursting up in remembrance.

Later she will wonder if he kept his lips from hers for so long because he did not know if anyone else has been kissing her; she will find this more than odd

considering he wasn't put off enough to do other things, but it is the only explanation she could find. For now, all she could think about was each current second, forgotten once the next one came, and memorizing the taste, feel, dips, and curves of his mouth.

Day: 1139; Hour: 5

She gets a note, folded in quarters, from Lupin taped to her bedroom door. By the deepness of the creases, she guesses that it has been read by several passing curious people in the length of time she has been gone from Grimmauld Place.

Ron is with Harry, it reads, only and simply. She forgets her anger at the trespassing of her personal note, because Lupin has left it out in the open for a reason. To bring hope to everyone, as much as it brought hope to her. It meant that Harry's Horcrux search team had been disbanded, and it was left to the other team of Aurors they sent to find the last Horcrux before the Death Eaters. It meant it was all almost over. Most importantly, it meant her two best friends were safe for now; this brings her contentment and sleep.

Nine

Day: 1147; Hour: 2

"Adams did *not* create the Pepper-Up Potion."

"Yes, he *did*. He published it in New Potions and Remedies in 1792, and in Ways to Survive University in the beginning of 1793!"

"Dolagan published it in The Brewery in January of 1792, and his patent was published on it in 1791. They found his journals after his death, it spoke of the Pepper-Up which he began to create in 1787!"

"Your dates are wrong!" Hermione huffs, jabbing a finger in the air toward him. "All the books I've read have cited *Adams* as the creator of--"

"Then your *books* are wrong. What, do you borrow from the bloody Bullshit Section of Jokers Comic Shop? There--"

"*What*?"

"Shop in Wiltshire," Dean tries to get out before they recommence their yelling.

"Read up, Granger. It was Dolagan. I'd bet anything on it."

"You're so thick, Malfoy! You're like...like the people who think Edison invented the light bulb, and refuse to believe anything else even though--"

"I thought Edison *did* invent the light bulb?" Colin asks, cutting her off.

"Grah!" Hermione yells, shaking her hands at the two men across from her, almost running into Dean on her way from the room before he darts out of the way.

"Witches," Colin mutters behind her.

"*That* witch," Malfoy growls.

Day: 1151; Hour: 14

Malfoy slams her back into the fridge hard enough that the sugar bowl jolts off of

it and crashes onto the counter. His hands are up her shirt, cupping her breast, the other fingering the clasp at her back. His mouth was moist and wanting, his body pressed hard against hers, smothering her lovely.

Her initial reaction to him asking her if she had found out about whom, exactly, created the Pepper-Up Potion was to panic for a second, before quickly changing the subject…By snogging the hell out of him. She had quickly found her hands filled with a very demanding, very aroused blond, and the situation had spiraled out of control from there.

She wasn't even aware he had unsnapped her bra until he pulled it off so easily with her shirt. The whole reason she had allowed him to shuck the shirt was because she knew she would be at least minimally protected from complete upper nudity. She blushes, flustered, realizing just *how bright* it was in the kitchen with the lights on. Her fear and insecurity weigh like a ball in her throat as he tosses her clothes to the ground. She was already moving her arms, ready to make a break for a bedroom in the most dignified way possible, when he is back. He presses himself against her again, covering her with his chest, and she breathes out harshly at the feel of the cotton against her nipples.

He ravages her mouth before leaving for her neck, going off the noises she makes to relocate the spots he has not yet remembered by heart. He burns a trail to her collarbone, licking and scraping his teeth, and she wakes from her daze again the closer he gets to her breasts. Her embarrassment joins the flush of her arousal against her chest, neck, and face, and she wraps her fingers around his shoulder to stop him.

"Malfoy, I…I really don't th-- Oh. *God*." She packs her air up to stop herself from moaning, but it escapes anyway, long and deep from her throat.

Malfoy was not the first man to touch her breasts, but he was the first to clamp his mouth around her nipple like his current actions. She breathes out hard, grasping his hair in her fingers as he sucks, tugging gently with his teeth before he flicks the tip of his tongue against it. It is a whole new sensation that she did not think she was possible of in that area, and later she will blush at the memory of pushing into his mouth and moaning his name.

"Touch me, Granger," he whispers roughly, straightening to kiss her shoulder, her jaw, her lips. She was confused for a second, aware of her hands already being *on* him until he thrusts his hips forward and she gets the idea.

Jesus, she thinks. It was something she has done before, but this was Malfoy, and

that made all the difference. Her hands feel uncoordinated and disobedient when she unbuttons and unzipped his pants, and he kisses her before she can start to doubt herself. The backs of her fingers slide against the skin of his hips and legs as she hooks them under the band of his trousers and shorts, shoving them down as far as she can. His arousal springs up between them, freed, and she can feel his groan to the bottom of her stomach when she wraps her hand around him. It is primal, and sets off something inside of her that has her pumping the length of him before she can question how best to go about things. His hips rock with her, allowing her to set the rhythm. When he tangles his fingers in her hair, pulling her head back for better access to her mouth, she feels absolutely devoured in the best way possible. Like she was drowning, before realizing she could breathe under water.

He drops a hand, wrapping it around hers and guiding her up to the head of his penis, gathering the moisture there before sliding her hand back down. He leaves her at it, flattening his hand against her stomach and tucking his fingers under the waist of her jeans, fingering the band of her knickers. He's running out of breath, leaving her lips to kiss and breath open mouthed against her shoulder. She takes the opportunity to kiss his neck, the first time she had done so to him, and finds she rather liked how responsive he was. He moans, snapping his hips faster, his fingers wrapping tightly around her hip while the other moves back to her breast.

"That's it, Granger. Just like that," he groans, his voice sending vibrations along her tongue. He's leaning heavily into her, and she can feel his heartbeat hammering in rhythm to hers against her chest and in his throat.

He bites her shoulder, just enough for a little discomfort, and she bit the place where his neck and shoulder meet in return. He comes hard the moment she does, the tendons raised in his neck as he tries to hold his voice back, a long guttural moan escaping between his teeth and her skin. His muscles tense under her palm on his shoulder, the ones in his arm bunching solid against her. She can feel the wetness on her hand, spraying out on her stomach, and she thinks she should be disgusted but she isn't.

He pants against her, sagging heavily for a few brief seconds before turning his head to lick at her neck. His thumb circles lazily around her nipple, and she isn't at all sure about what she should do with herself. He reaches down, tugging her wrist to pull her hand away from him, and she blushes as he pulls back.

Lifting his shirt over his head, she traces the lines of his chest that she hasn't seen since he was lying injured in her bed. She watches them move with him, against his skin, and lifts her eyes to his, staring down at her with a look she can't place. His eyes are dark, mouth red, and his face flushed, and she can see that she

has left a mark on his neck from her teeth. *Too hard*, she thinks, though he doesn't seem to mind…yet.

She thinks he will toss the shirt, but he bundles it and wipes her stomach off instead. She wondered what he thinks when he's looking at her body, but tells herself it doesn't matter, given the obvious arousal he has just had for it. He takes her hand, lifting it, and closes his cloth-covered hand around it, wiping it off as best he can. She thinks the gesture is as sweet as it can be considering the situation.

"I…I really don't know if I--"

"Yes, yes. I know." His lips lift in a half-smile she had never seen on him before, his voice husky, and then he was kissing her again.

It is several minutes later, when she had reached the point that borders on incoherency, when she finds him pulling down her pants. *Her* naked self so very close to *his* naked self nearly sends her into panic, but he tears his mouth from hers and drops to his knees before she can run away from what she thinks was about to happen.

"Wha-- What are you doing?" The strange deepness of her voice, mixed with the squeak her vocals just tried to push it into, makes it unrecognizable to her ears.

She tried to shut her legs, her face positively flaming with embarrassment, but he holds his palms firmly against the inside of her thighs and refuses to let them budge. Jesus, *no one* has seen down there since she was four, but her and her doctor for yearly physicals.

"I'll give you three guesses." He looks up at her, removing her foot from one leg of her pants, and moving to kiss her inner thigh.

"Oh, no. No, no, I really don't think--" He pushes his thumb into her folds, circling her clit and cutting her off with her own moan.

"Relax, Granger, you're going to like this. I promise."

She smacks a hand over her face, leaning against the fridge to support herself. His breath is hot against her and he pulls his thumb away, sliding a finger on either side to part her. She could nearly cry from her embarrassment over it, and she thinks she may be dying or about to set herself on fire.

"Oh," he breathes, and she squeezes her fingers harder against her face, shutting

her eyes. "You are so wet for me, Granger, aren't you?"

He speaks more, but it is muffled as he presses his mouth into her, and she can feel the air against her as he sucks in deeply. She bucks at the first contact of his tongue, yelping out against her palm, her eyes wide open now. He lifts a hand to press it against her stomach, his mouth growing less cautionary and more as she knows it; fierce and taking what it wants. *He* certainly doesn't seem to mind where he is, or how it looks, smells, or tastes down there, and he was doing a bloody good job of making her forget to mind it as well. He sucks and laves at her, circling and swiping her clit, and leaving it only to broadly lick at her opening. He runs around it, teasingly flicking the tip of his tongue inside, coaxing her body into giving him more.

It is seconds or minutes before her hand on her face has forgotten to cover the vanished traces of her mortification, and instead covers her mouth to stop from being so *loud*. She sobs out his name, over and over, her hips moving against his face and her other hand pulling unconsciously at his hair. The heel of her foot from the leg he has drawn over his shoulder will likely bruise him later, but she can't find the mind to *care* about a single thing other than where he was taking her.

"I…I just want…" She moans, smacking her head against the fridge when she throws it back, so close, *so close, so close*, to dropping off the edge of the world.

She buries her hand deep into his hair, her nails scratching against his scalp as she balls her hand into a fist. He sucks her clit into his mouth, swiping it roughly, and presses his hand hard into her stomach. She comes with a loud, deep cry, bones locking and toes curling against the floor and him, as her mind shuts down and power explodes from her gut. She has never come so hard before, and she was almost scared of how powerful it was, fearing she might blackout or crumble down on top of him -- but without the presence of mind enough to actually care if she did.

When she comes down enough to gain some bearing on where she was at in the world, her body is still tingling and shaking with the aftermath, oxygen burning her as she gulps in air. There is a very wet mouth breathing hard at the bottom of her neck, and she drowsily opens her eyes, blinking to rid her vision of the blurriness.

The blond hair at the corner of her sight moves, his face appearing in front of hers. He simply stares at her for a handful of her rapidly decreasing heart beats, and his hand covers the one still laying limply over her mouth. He pulls it away, moving it to her side. "Next time, Granger," he whispers, "none of this. I want to hear you."

Next time, she thinks, trying to concentrate on it before giving up. Her mind was

too lazy now to try to process the meanings of his words. He lowers his head, his kiss just as lazy as her mind, and it takes her much longer than it should to know why he tastes differently.

He pulls away before she can do it herself, unsure of how she feels about just having *tasted herself*. He steps back from her, his erection bobbing with his movement, and she looks at it, wiping her mouth. He is a decent size -- she had come to find this out when she touched him -- though she doesn't know if he is larger or more average. It is big *enough* she knows, and that's more than good enough for her.

She thinks he may try something else now that he is hard again, but he reaches down to pull up his clothes instead. He leaves them unbuttoned and grabs her bra and shirt as she pulls her own pants up, already covering her breasts with an arm.

"Thanks," she whispers as he hands them to her, wincing as she departs quickly from the room and remembers saying the same the last time they had gotten so physical. At least she was referring to something else this time. Though, for all that he has just given her, he could take it for whatever he wanted it to mean and it'll fit.

She cannot believe she actually just let him do that to her, and she was blushing hot red before she even makes it to the bedroom. Not that he minded, and not that he hasn't probably done it to several other woman -- he has *obviously* done it a time or two before. But it was quite mortifying to know it was her this time.

At least she hadn't tasted wretched, from what she got off his mouth, though she can't be sure with only the traces of it. It was Malfoy, after all -- he would have likely stopped and taken to doing something else if it was that bad. And it *had* felt positively mind-blowing, so who was she to complain, really?

She groans with memory, finding clothes to head for the shower. If she concentrates on the way it felt, she decides, over how he went about making her feel that way or the way she had rubbed herself all over him in the process, it wasn't exactly regrettable. In the least.

Day: 1164; Hour: 3

"Hermione. Granger."

She does her best to look innocent as she looks up to the doorway of the dining room, and feels her face contort into the look of shock she had been practicing all night. "George! What *happened?*"

He narrows his eyes, his face shined and covered in seasoning. "I know you did this."

"What? I did not!" But she is starting to laugh, because it's *funny*. "I'm sorry, it's just…you look *ridiculous*."

"I look like one of Fleur's bloody turkeys!"

The giggling she was trying to suppress breaks out into hysterics. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Oh, give it up!" He takes a step forward and she immediately jumps up from her chair, tripping over her feet as her laughter makes her clumsy.

"I would never--"

"Don't you know better than to mess with a Weasley twin? Hmm? Revenge!"

"Hey! Hey, this is *my* revenge for my *hair* that was red for *months*!"

"Most of my body is covered in butter and seasoning!"

"It'll wash off." She cackles as he wobbles toward her, his feet sliding over the floor.

"George?" The question is met with several snickers from behind him, and he glares at the woman across from him, raising his finger.

"Retribution, Granger! It's coming."

Hermione promises herself to leave the house within the next two days, before Fred arrives and whatever plan George is probably scheming up this very moment turns that much more diabolical. For now, she laughs right along with the rest of them.

Day: 1168; Hour: 13

She had been flustered since she walked in and found him sitting at the table, and all she can think about is the last time they were in a kitchen together. He doesn't notice her nervous movement though, or at least she doesn't think he does, and she tries to act as normal as possible.

"I hate these things. They always stay cold in the middle, no matter how long you keep them in the microwave."

"So cut it in half," Malfoy mutters, busy reading the newspaper he has somehow acquired. Hermione will steal it from him later, she thinks, so she can catch up on what's going on outside of their protected little circle.

Hermione looks back to the microwave, watching the food spin in the dull yellow light. "But it's in the box."

He makes a sound like a sigh and a growl; aggravated. "So take it *out* of the box."

"But it says to put it in the little box in order to cook it. And the little box has this little insulation thing that's supposed to cook it better."

"Do you always have to follow directions, Granger? I take the thing out of the box, cut it in half, and it cooks fine. It's perfectly all right to do things that work when the other option doesn't. Even if it *says* to do it the wrong way."

"But--"

"It must be terribly boring for you, your structured little life. No wonder you're so bloody uptight. If one thing goes wrong, it's such a big problem, because to you it just can't *be* any other way."

She narrows her eyes dangerously at him. "I was just talking about a Hot Pocket."

"Exactly. It's a fucking Hot Pocket. What does it *matter* if it says to put it in the cardboard thing?"

"It's just the principle that if they created it, they must know the best way to cook it."

"Fine. Eat the middle cold then." He shakes out his paper, dismissing the conversation.

"I do not have a big problem if something small interrupts the way I think something will be."

"Right. That's why we just spent two minutes arguing over a Hot Pocket."

"That's because you're a prat who thinks he knows how I am."

"That's because you're an uptight bitch who thinks I can't see something so obvious. You're probably going to die in five years from a heart attack or high blood pressure." He runs his finger over the top of the newspaper. "'Hermione Granger, Departed From Anxiety Over Cold Hot Pocket'. Life isn't meant to be a plan, Granger. It just happens. Metaphorically, you either shove that cold Hot Pocket down your throat or you cut it in half and make it work."

She glares at him for a second more before popping the microwave open and quickly pulling the hot edge of the food out of the container. She cuts it loudly, the knife banging against the plate to show her frustration, and then pushes it back into the microwave.

"Happy, Malfoy?"

He smirks down at the paper. "It's not matter of my happiness, Granger -- it's yours."

Day: 1175; Hour: 11

"...and then three drops of the Belledonna, stir it clockwise a dozen times, and there you go. I think Grimmauld Place actually has--"

"Hermione." She jumps, turning from her conversation with Cho to look at Anthony across the table.

She can feel the tips of her ears heat up as she realizes the whole room is focused on her, and feels very much like she has just been busted speaking in class. Cho flushes as well, clearing her throat and turning forward in her chair again.

"I'm sure you can find other uses for that mouth of yours, Granger," Malfoy drawls, eyebrow arched, and it takes a second for her eyes to open wide in a combination of surprise and fear; because she *knows* the rest of the room will get his meaning just as clearly as she does. "Like keeping it shut."

Her heart does a strange hop/pound that has her breathing out in a rush and glaring at him, and he smirks at her in reply. *Ass*, she thinks, because she knows he had known exactly what he would do to her if he said that. It opens her mind to an avenue she can't believe she hasn't thought of before -- like what if Malfoy *did* blurt it out in front of everyone? Or tell a few people about their encounters, which would spread through the rest of the Order and Ministry in about two days? She could

deny it until her tongue fell out, but half the damage would still be done. People might be doing things together all over the map in their group, but it isn't quite as controversial as Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy.

However, if he hadn't done it yet, she doubted he would. Malfoy was a private person, built with paranoia, to the point where he wants to know *why* someone would ask him what he had for dinner rather than just telling them -- and he still wouldn't if they answered the why.

She watches his mouth when he talks, circling areas on the board. She tries not to think about it, though she knew she was inviting it by staring, but she recalled his mouth in all the ways she knows it. Talking, insulting, kissing, and...well. Just watching his tongue move past and against the lines of his teeth in speech, his lips moving, and stretching, and pouting, makes her think of all sorts of things that she should not be thinking of.

Especially here. She finds her body answering in a way she did not expect it to, recalling in detail just what that mouth was capable of making her feel when it isn't talking. *This is not good*, she thinks. She had become far more attracted to Malfoy than she had been in the beginning, despite that she had thought her attraction would stay the same or taper off. By the time she moves from his mouth to his hands, the length of his fingers, she had to stare down at the table just to get her heart rate under control. Oh, this is *so* not good.

Day: 1184; Hour: 8

She waits until Cho Chang and the three Aurors at the house have gone to bed or their bedrooms for their night, before looking for him where she always finds him at night. If Lavender decides to make her assumptions more public, Hermione doesn't need to give everyone else something to remember of it as well.

"No television, huh?" He doesn't answer, though she knows he usually doesn't with redundant or simpleminded questions. "I thought you had a mission tomorrow."

"I do."

"Shouldn't you be sleeping? It's four in the morning."

"I should be doing whatever I want to be doing, which I am," he snaps, and his apparent attitude makes her rethink her decision to join him.

"Okay," she says slowly, fidgeting with her bracelet. "Well, good luck with it, then."

She makes to turn around, but stops when he speaks. "Sunrise is in an hour."

"Yes." She scratches at the curve of her ear, not quite sure where he's going with this.

"There's a lake, over that hill in the back of this house. Once the sun rises over the hill it'll hit that lake." He shrugs. "It's not exactly a bay, but I figured you might want to know."

His last sentence clues her in to what he's talking about, and she remembers their conversation on the grass after his fight with Seamus. "Thank you."

He raises an eyebrow and looks down from the wall to his knees, a hint of a smirk on his lips. "I seem to get that from you fairly often now."

She blushes. "Shut up."

She would have normally tried to quickly change the subject, but her mind is too busy still wondering how it is that Malfoy remembers a minute detail from a conversation they had months ago.

"Come here," he murmurs, and she returned her attention to him, his face toward her now.

It takes her several faltering seconds to get her feet to respond to her brain, and she feels a little jumbled on her journey to the couch. She halts, hesitant and unsure, before sitting next to him. He doesn't give her a second to be uncomfortable, leaning over and gripping the back of her head to kiss her. His mouth is harder than usual, and he kisses her like he's angry, though she doesn't think it's directed at her. His previous attitude meant he was angry already, and she supposed this was his way of channeling that out from the place he keeps it inside of himself.

She guesses Malfoy uses her to forget to think about things just as much as she uses him for it too.

It takes her a few minutes to calm the roughness of his lips and tongue, and the strength in which he grips her head. He relaxes slowly when she refuses to give into his anger and kiss him back the same, and then he takes his time about it. He's softer, exploratory, with little licks and nips. He's tasting her rather than trying to

take something out on her, and his hand tangles in her hair, her heart thrumming wildly in her chest, pressed against his. He kisses her breathless, and then he kisses her more.

Later, when he has left and the sun turns the black lake water into rippling shades of gold and yellow, she wonders what she's gotten herself into.

Day: 1193; Hour: 18

There is an eerie silence within the walls of the house on Grimmauld Place, and Hermione knows something is wrong before Anthony ever turns the corner, rumpled, sleep-deprived, and as pale as Malfoy.

"What's wrong?"

"Cho," his voice cracks and he clears it. "She's been injured. Garrett is banged up. Smitts is dead."

"What happened? How bad is it?"

"I don't know. We *never* fucking know, do we? Won't say a God-damned thing." He is livid but grief-filled, which explains why his hair sticks up in every which direction -- like he has been yanking at it for hours.

"Will Cho and Garrett be alright?" She does not know the latter, but feels it is polite to ask.

"Garrett's fine. Will be in a few days anyway. Cho… I don't know. She'll live, but…but it's going to take so long for her to find out how to move on with her life."

Hermione opens her mouth for more details, but her eyes find Moody thumping down the steps and she stops herself. He looks harassed, and it was one of the few times she does not look over the battle-weariness of his face, the marks of wars, and of a man who chose a harder life.

"Malfoy's missing."

"*What*?" Hermione breathes and chokes over the words, the hairs at the nape of her neck standing on edge. A thousand possibilities run through her, slamming off the walls of her brain for attention, and they cripple her dropped mouth and wide eyes.

"He was here just an hour ago." Anthony shakes his head, and Hermione realizes there is air and she can breathe it. He was missing from *here*, then. And she takes to thinking about calming down the pumping of her heart rather than concentrating on why she was thrown into such a panic attack over it.

"The plan failed. He's licking his wounds somewhere." Moody checks his watch, grunting. "He can do that after the war. You kids and your damn pity sessions are going to draw this out another year. Even in the face of failure, constant vig--"

"Well we weren't exactly made for war, Moody, and nor did we choose it. We all can't deal with the stress as well as others who have gotten used to it," Hermione snaps, and there is silence after her defense of them...of *him*.

"But it's where you *are*, and there's no room for excuses," Moody bites back, the two of them staring at one another until someone backs down. It is her, her gaze to the floor, her lips still pressed into a line and anger hot in her eyes.

Day: 1199; Hour: 12

Hermione has been to three safe houses in five days, and came up blond-less at each one. She doesn't exactly know why she's bothering to look, but there is something that tugs at her knowing what he must be going through. She can't imagine the guilt that must come with leading a team and having more than half injured, and one fatally. She does not allow herself to recognize anything more than the surface of her thoughts -- that she does not want him to feel guilty over this, because he already has too much guilt inside of him.

It is not his fault; she would like to tell him. And she would say the same to a friend or a stranger, because it is the truth, and no one should put more on himself or herself than what belongs to them. If the boulder he's pushing up the hill grows too large, she thinks, he might just give up.

Ten

Day: 1203; Hour: 5

She sits beside him, and he does not move. She shifts, the wood uncomfortable under her, and brushes her arm against his. He stares at the bottom step of the porch below them, or at the patch of dirt, but she doesn't think he sees anything. It was long minutes or short hours before she heard the sound of his clothes against the porch step, and she met his eyes as his head turns toward her.

Her hands are as cold as his cheeks when she puts them on either side of his face, his lips chapped when she kissed them. He breathes out in a gust of warm air, but he does not kiss her back. She pulls away slightly, meeting the grey of his eyes that match the color of the current cloudy day, and is encouraged with the slight hint of red, of warmth, across his cheekbones.

"Happ--" he begins, but she knows what he means to say, and it is not the time for birthday well-wishes.

"You did the best you could."

It is the wrong thing to say despite that she wouldn't change it if given the chance, and he pulls away from her hands, standing. She turns her head, blinking at his boots as they step out of her sight, before standing and facing him.

"Draco, you're a damn good strategist. There was nothing you could do!"

He whips around, the wind harsh against their frozen skin, and his hair flies up with it. "I could have done *everything*! Because it was *me* who wasn't *good enough*. *I* failed. I *fucked* up. I'm not the one who needs to be told everything is fucking all right for that! Tell that to Smitts's family, or Chang lying in fucking hospital right now without her fucking fingers!"

"But it's not your fault! You can't predict what would happen! You did the best with what you had! You were under-informed. It was obviously a bad situation, and you still managed to get four of you out of there alive! Anyone else, and you would all be on your way to the cemetery plots off Kieser Avenue! No one blames you. You can't blame yourself."

He stares at her and shakes his head, stares more and shakes it again before

turning and storming into the house. She makes it two steps inside before she hears a door slam shut, and she knew there would be no getting through to him tonight.

Day: 1204; Hour: 10

She had breakfast waiting for him that afternoon when he finally ventured out of the bedroom after he retreated there the night before. She thought it was the smell that has led him to the kitchen instead of back into the room from the bathroom. He is never really one to hide.

"Eggs are all we have." She shrugs and he takes a bit to decide on eating the scrambled eggs left in the pan.

He takes a seat across from her, though she thought he would have left, but he eats in silence and she lets it stay that way.

Later, long after he had left the room and she had done the dishes, she finds him staring out at the woods on the back porch again. He talks about change and controlling his life, and how he never could do either right. How he saw it like the ease of water for some, fluid and seamless, but he was always jilted. She listens and doesn't speak for a very long time.

"It's like plants. How plants need light to grow toward. And I've been winding and winding, but I still can't fucking find it. I don't have anything I'm digging for. Survive the war -- and where will I be after that?"

She steps up beside him when she realizes that this is a question he wouldn't care if she answered or not. She brushes her thumb against his pinky and takes three of his fingertips, ice cold, in her hand. "With the rest of us."

He is quiet, not responding to her touch but not pulling away either. His warmth seeps from his blood, through his skin and into hers, the touch spreading warmth into both their frozen digits.

"I'm the car crash, Granger," he whispers. "I'm the fallout."

They stand there for a while, in a silence that should have been uncomfortable but wasn't. They watch the last of day fade, give, then flow into night, and when the temperature drops even lower and the wind is freezing them to statues, he moves away and back inside.

Day: 1206; Hour: 19

She gives her virginity to Draco Malfoy on a cold day in late September. The light is as pale as he through the window above the bed, the muted sun catching the lightness of his coloring and tinting it with shine above her. Her skin is slightly darker, and she watches the contrast of their skin tones as she slides her hands up his chest, feeling the pull of muscles, bone and skin beneath her palms. She had never thought she would lose her virginity in the day, though she supposed it doesn't matter because she never thought she would lose it to this man either. Despite all her opposition toward sex outside of a relationship, it was something she wanted to give to him, and that she wanted him to take from her.

She does not think and analyze it more, because he tried to teach her how to do things because she wants to, and this was something she tries to learn. All she does think about is the way his hand had balled up her shirt and he had kissed her like he needed to, because she thinks sometimes that she needs this too.

He presses down into her, resting his weight on his elbows as he cradles her head and devours her mouth, but his skin is touching hers in all the right places. She tries to commit every sensation to memory, so she can remember how good it felt just to have a naked man on top of her own naked body. She could just lie like this for a very long, and this would be fine. She likes his hardness in contrast to her softness; his chest to her breasts, his stomach to her slightly rounded one, and his arousal pushing against the heat of her.

For once in her life she feels very much like a *woman* -- the smaller, more fragile one of the sexes -- and she does not mind it. There is something to like about feeling safe, so close to the strength of a man, and she allows herself to not try to be stronger this time. She feels protected in the boundaries of his arms and body, and this was a feeling she could get used to.

She pulls her lips away from his, pushing her head back into the pillows, and grasps the top of his arms. His muscles bunch in awareness and reaction as his lips dip low to her neck, and she wonders what was taking him so long. She had been in a state of high arousal five minutes after he laid her on the bed, and this must have been fifteen minutes ago, at least. It is not that she doesn't like it, but she would like to rid her bones of the anxiety as well as help dissipate the ache that is making her hands tremble.

She pants for breath, staring at the ceiling, and when she notices his lips have been away from her too long, she brings her head back down to see what he's doing. Looking at her, of course, and there she had been lost in her thoughts of all horrible times to do so. He does not seem too bothered over it as he had been in the past, continuing to look at her strangely, one hand fingering her curls. His other has left

her hair, and he glances down at it to watch it curve over the swell of her breast, and she blushes heavily. She does not know if she would ever get used to someone looking at her naked, and knowing her imperfections as much as she knows them.

He looks back up at her, his nail scraping over the nipple he had hardened minutes, and minutes, and minutes ago. It takes her some time to realize he is waiting for something, and even longer to guess what it might be.

She runs her hands up to his shoulders, tugging him down, and strains up to kiss him. He kisses her back hotly, and when he pinches her nipple and she arches her hips, it seems to be all that he needs to know.

He is quick, and then waits, her eyes squeezed shut and her head tilted back again into the pillows. She thought he would continue going on, but he, at times, is the epitome of what she does not think he is. She isn't sure if she would rather the continued pain of him going while she was already hurting, or the embarrassment over being in pain, and likely having him watch her while she is.

"Breathe," he whispers by her ear, though she can't recall him moving toward it, and his fingertips slide against her bottom lip to pull it from her teeth.

She does, sucking in, exhaling, sucking in, and it's better now, fading into the feeling of being filled up by him. It was very odd to know one has someone else inside of their own body, but it feels less like an invasion and more like a fulfillment, so she does not panic over it.

"I'm on a contraceptive pill," she says, and it's probably not the best time, but it's too late for in the beginning.

She has been on it for a few years now, since she thought something might happen with Ron, which God knew they had been close to. She had stayed on it after their breakup due to the ease it gave her during her monthly cramping, and she is thankful for that now. She opens her eyes, his face hovering over hers. "It's a--"

"I know what it is."

"Oh." He moves his hips in a slow circle, examining her face. "*Oh*."

He is pleased with this response, and pulls himself almost completely out of her before slowly sinking back in again. His face was strict with concentration, and her breathing was already speeding up. It was one of the most lovely sensations she can recall feeling, and she quickly changes her mind on the just laying in bed idea. *This*

can be done at the same time, she decides, and it is so much better. Elevated in a way she could have never imagined it could be.

"You can go a little faster." She breathes, gripping his shoulders still.

He huffs a laugh, the lust-hazed eyes she had just committed to memory now shining with amusement when he looks at her. "I *knew* you would be bossy here as well."

It is a testament to her mental state that she had nothing to come back at this with, and doesn't even want to. She moves her legs instead, raising them to plant her feet on the mattress, and when he sinks deeper they both moan. The sound, the tangling of their two voices, sends a jolt to her womb, and she has to kiss him again just to vent the emotion.

He does as she had asked, speeding up, his fingers digging deeper into her hip the longer they go. He speeds up gradually with time, until her breasts are bouncing rhythmically against his chest, and the sound of skin slapping skin joins the echoing of their moans and grunts.

"Oh," she whispers against his lips. "This feels…this feels… Oh."

He pulled up, his face red and beginning to shine, his eyes dilated and tracking her facial expressions. She forgets to care about how his attentiveness makes her feel like ditching her skin, and studies him back. She enjoys the movements of his muscles and bones, watching the strength under his skin as he continues rocking into her. She traces the movements of his shoulders with her hands, her eyes following down his neck, chest, and to where his pelvis was repeatedly meeting hers. She knows she must look quite mesmerized by it, but frankly, she was. Hermione Granger has found suddenly that she *likes* sex. Sex with Draco Malfoy. And this made her feel less wrong and more liberated than anything.

She thought she was making too much noise, breathing grunts and incoherent words she doesn't even know in her throat, but she cannot stop. Her hands journey every inch of him she can reach, squeezing hard into the top of his arms when he lowers his hand from her hip to flick his thumb across her clit. She lifts her hips, awkwardly at first before quickly finding his rhythm and making it theirs.

"I'm…*fuck*!" he whispers, and bends his head, nipping her neck as his hips grow erratic.

He is coming, the room filled with the sound of his long, deep groan that sounded

as if it was shoved out of his throat. She was not put out by this, but more entranced by the *way* in which he comes to think about the fact she hasn't yet. He collapses onto her, absolutely still, save for his ragged breathing, for a few stutters of his heartbeat against her chest. He moves then, his thumb, circling around her nub before giving it a light squeeze. Her moan draws his head up from her, and he gives her a sloppy kiss before pushing himself down the length of her body. Despite just how turned on she was, she cannot help but be mortified at just where he was putting his tongue after he came inside of her. She was sweaty, and his seed was probably all over her, and *Jesus*, there he went.

Her hips buck up uncontrollably, and he meets her eyes from between her legs, giving her his classic smirk and arched eyebrow before pushing her down by her stomach.

"S-Sorry." She pants, moaning as he dives back in.

She clenches the wrinkled sheet in her hands, whimpering as his tongue traces her opening gently before tracking up the length of her. He nibbles, and licks, and sucks until she is a constant chorus of noises, and dear *God*, did she actually just *beg* him?

She is indignant with her own self, but only during the lack of time it takes him to lick back up to her clit. Then her thoughts are forgotten again, buried under the weight of need that had her body thrumming and her mouth rambling. Malfoy doubles his efforts, his hands cupping her bum and tilting her, his mouth solely concentrated on that one pleasurable spot. She feels her orgasm building like the pounding of a drum, of her heartbeat.

Her body was shoved out of the realms of control as she finally hits the edge, her body arching on its own accord, the back of her head digging into the pillow. She can hear a yell, faintly, and does not register that it is herself. The pleasure that overtakes her and robs her of anything normal was indefinable. The world was simply gone; she could be floating, or dreaming, or no one at all, and she would never know.

She collapses back onto the bed, sucking in air, and her mind slowly falling back into her head, making the transition from blackness to reality. Her body tingles, her brain whirling like sleep. Opening her eyes, she gazes at the ceiling until the colors focus, and then relaxes her head to look down the bed. Malfoy's hands are pushed against the bed to either side of her hips, his eyes attached to hers, but she was still too deep into the afterglow to be unnerved. She slowly lets her fingers and toes uncurl, and sighs deeply in satisfaction.

Lavender just might have the right mind set about all of this after all. Though, not about him. No, not about him, not even close.

It was far more powerful than she thought it would be, and this scares her now, but only just. It was incredible, and there was no denying that, even if she was already aching from their actions. She mentally groans at the idea of needing to get up now, and raises a tired arm to cover her breasts. If she doesn't move now, she was not sure she would at all.

She blushes when she fails at her first attempt to sit up without the use of her hands, and Malfoy pushes up to his knees, taking her arm and pulling her up himself. She nods her appreciation, turning redder at his proximity to her face and her spread-eagle positioning, and moves her leg around his body to join the other. She winces at the movement, biting her lips as it sends a jolt of pain up her stomach.

This was more awkward for her than any other time she had been in his presence, and she thinks that perhaps *this* was the reason one should only sleep with men they are close with. Nothing says trashy like rolling out of bed after sex with a man you don't feel comfortable touching because he's no longer pounding into you.

She grabs her knickers off the bedside table, making faces at her soreness as she quickly pulls them on and stands from the bed. She collected the rest of her clothes, balling them like a shield in front of her breasts, and looks back to the bed when she is done. Malfoy sits at the edge, still naked, his feet on the floor, looking at her with his eyebrows raised.

"No thank you this time, then?"

She turns brighter, and shifts on her feet, trying to decide on what to do. He does not sound as if he has meant it to come off as anything harsher than teasing, and she doesn't have a clue what to do in this situation at all.

So she does what she is getting used to doing with him, second only to arguing, and kisses him after she has reached his knees. It is brief but lingering, and she pulls away just as his knuckles brush down her bare side. She stands upright, hesitating, before turning for the door.

Day: 1207; Hour: 3

Hermione emerges from the bath, feeling slightly less sore than she had stepping in. She had been achy after yesterday's event, but it had been worse upon waking

this morning. The bath had done well for her, but she figured she will need another day or two to feel more normal.

While she had once thought that losing her virginity would make her relationship with the receiver of it more deeper and meaningful, she does not take it like that now because of just *who* the receiver was. She *does* feel a sense of maturity and power in her bones, though she isn't sure why -- yes, she had finally reached the stage most sixteen year olds hit with light alcohol and summer nights. But it was still wonderful, and she does not want to take anything away from that. She felt a sort of elation in a way she did not expect to feel at all, especially given the circumstances. Regret was something she thought might come, but it never did.

Malfoy was banging around in the kitchen, and though there was a large part of her that wanted to hide away in her room so she doesn't stumble and stutter all over herself, she knows she must face up sometime. While she may have mentally found herself agreeing on the sex issue last night with her sexually active friends, she doesn't think she could handle the morning after with the same amount of ease.

She was silent in the doorway for a while, watching him wash the dishes, just so she can rid herself of her anxiety. It was strange to see someone naked and then see them with clothes on, or maybe this was just her, but she can't help but imagine with mental imagery what he would look like standing there with nothing on. This, of course, brings back memory images from yesterday, which doesn't help her anxiety at all. Instead, she found herself standing there with a sort of *anticipation* that surprised her, and she wondered when she turned into such an easily aroused person. Perhaps one couldn't be made to feel that good without craving it when they saw the source... Maybe this was normal.

She clears her throat, and the silverware he's cleaning clatters against the sink. "You know, everyone's wondering where you are. Moody told us all that if we see you, to make sure you report to Headquarters that day."

He pauses his scrubbing, the water from the tap rushing against the metal sink and drowning out the sigh she can see his body move with. "And you didn't think to tell me this four days ago?"

"I didn't think you would care to hear it four days ago."

He stays still for a moment more; because she was either right or he was irritated with her, and goes back to cleaning his dishes. "There are three eggs left in the fridge. That's all that's left in the house."

"Alright."

"You should considering returning to Grimmauld with me."

"I can't." He doesn't answer, so she explains. "Moody will know I waited on telling you since he knows where I've been, and showing up with you will tell him you were with me. Dean is also coming in two days, and I have to go with him for this...thing."

"Come a few hours after me, and then come back here when Dean is supposed to get here."

"We're not allowed that much travel, or travel without approval unless under certain circumstance."

"Like starving to death?"

"I would rather not risk Moody's wrath. I was already on suspension."

"He won't suspend you for getting food, Grang--"

"For not telling you right away."

"He won't find out."

"He will."

"Suit yourself then, Granger. I could give a shit," he snaps, dropping the last fork onto the folded towel beside the sink.

He leaves twenty minutes later, rigid and stern-faced, and she doesn't know if it's because of her refusal over his suggestion or what's coming to him when he gets back to Headquarters. Later that night, when there's a thump and clank from the porch, she turns on the porch lights to find a garbage bag at the top of the steps. She stares at it, unsure if she should even go near it or go outside, but she had always been too curious for her own good.

After scanning the area with her wand, and holding still for noise, she rushes through the coldness and hauls the bag up. Object clink and smack together, so at least she knows it is not a person's head or anything else her wild imagination had thought up on the other side of the door.

Once she was safely tucked back inside, she carefully unknots the strings and

stares down at the food inside of it. She stares and stares some more, knowing where it came from, but not knowing why. She grins stupidly at the contents, the worry of what to do for food melting from her shoulders, and lugs it into the kitchen.

Draco Malfoy really is something else. Sometimes she thinks he does things just to keep her guessing at whom he is, and this certainly played into that.

Day: 1212; Hour: 17

The streets are dark and damp, but Hermione can handle this over the constant catcalls and strange laughter from the ones they had walked past to get here. Dean seems to know the way to their destination easily, as he's taken this trip dozens of times, or so he told her.

The house was old, abandoned for a decade she would guess, and every step on the creaking floor made her think she was going to fall through. She avoided the holes where other people's feet have snapped through the wood, trying to find the strongest spots in the light from her wand. The basement smells of mold, old and foul, when Dean leads her down the steps. She halts in time with him at the whimpering noise that comes from their left, and she swings her light there before their goosebumps cover the full journey of their bodies.

"Shit," Dean whispers, and it was he that was first to move, tripping over litter and rusted pipes on his run toward Hannah.

"I thought you said a *package,*" Hermione hisses, jumping over the barricade of boxes, but it doesn't matter as *this* was obviously the package.

Hermione had known that it was a Death Eater of lower ranking that they sometimes manage to obtain information from, but she had had no idea that *people* come from this deal as well. She was just ten seconds away from reaching Hannah, bound and gagged to a series of pipes that hung between the strips of wood that make the ceiling, when she cracks her arm off something. The sound is hard and loud, and she has just enough time to register the flare of pain before she is flown backwards.

There is air rushing around her, the stench of the basement more prevalent, and her eyes wide with fear in the dark. She can just make out the shrinking figure of Hannah blinded by Dean's wand light before there was more pain, as if her back has just snapped. She can feel the explosion in her brain as her head cracks off something, and the world tilts just as darkness sets in before her body can even hit

the ground.

Day: 1213; Hour: 23

There is black, she knows, though she can't figure out how long it had been there. When she opens her eyes, the world is dim, and it takes her awhile to register her surroundings. A bed, a ceiling, the flickering shadows of candles, and an unfamiliar face above hers.

"Hello, Miss Granger. You're at Grimmauld Place. You were knocked unconscious. Can you tell me the last thing you remember?"

Her head is pounding and tight, as if someone shoved an entire drum set inside and handed a child the drumsticks. She reached numbly for her temples, closing her eyes, and rubbing at them as if that will lift the imaginary palms currently squeezing her head. Her back was shooting fire up along her spine, and all she wanted to do was blackout again.

"I, uh..." She clears her throat, concentrates. "Dean. Hannah. I was hit with something."

"Yes, yes. It seems Miss Abbott couldn't see who it was that had entered, and fearing the worst, struck out. You flew into the side of the staircase, and have managed to bang yourself up a bit. Nothing a day or two can't fix though. Here, this will help your pain."

Hermione gulped the rancid liquid down, still thankful for it despite the taste. "Is Hannah okay?"

"She's perfectly alright. A little scraped up, but fine. You're lucky as well, Miss Granger. All bruises and cuts, but no broken bones. You could have been injured very badly."

Well, it sure *felt* like she was injured very badly.

"Takes a lot more to break Hermione." Neville, she recognizes, and turns her head to look at him.

"Hey."

"I'll give you ten minutes, and then Miss Granger has to sleep so the potions do what they are supposed to."

"Thanks." Neville waits until the Healer retreats to the other side of the room, and smiles down at her. "Dean sends his apologies and well wishes. He had to go to the Ministry to report, and then somewhere else."

"Oh. That's fine."

"How do you feel?"

"Horrible." She pretended this didn't come out as a whine.

"Taking hits from your own side now." He smiles again.

Hermione laughs, though it made her hurt worse. "I think I've taken more hits from our side throughout this war than I have the other."

He joins her laughter, nodding. "Same for me."

"We were not made for war."

"No one is," he whispers, running his fingers over the edge of her blanket. "I've been reading the Bible."

"Have you?"

"Yes. I wonder if faith comes from need or from fear, and then when I wonder if it's against God to think like that, I think it may be fear."

"We all know we are sinners, that's why. No matter our morals, throughout our lives, there are times when we are morally incorrect. When we lie, or we kill, or we betray, we are not perfect people. And we need to know someone forgives us for that, when we can't forgive ourselves."

"So for acceptance?"

She shrugged. "You know how some people, they say that God can't exist because of all the wrong that happens in the world? Well I think He does, because of all the things that happen that can't be explained. Sometimes I just look at the sun coming up, or when my cousin gave birth, or when people survive extreme things against all odds -- and I figure there's got to be someone there. You know?"

"So why do bad things happen?"

"Because we are bad people, who do bad things. Because God doesn't want us perfect -- he made humans, not robots. Man made robots. Metal perfection."

"So do you believe in following the Bible as the way we should act? Do you believe we're going to Hell for the things that we have done here?"

"I believe in living my life, and following what my heart tells me to follow. I don't think God is meant to constrict our lives, but to find the humanity in us when we don't want to find it. To force us to admit the things we do wrong, accept them, and try to forgive ourselves as we hope God will, but in a way that we learn from it. I don't believe in God out of need or fear. I believe in God because He's there."

"And of Hell?"

Hermione shuts her eyes, shakes her head. "I don't know."

Day: 1214; Hour: 13

How do you know when you can be forgiven for your actions, or when you have gone too far? Where was the line between defense and murder, must and mustn't?

Hermione was half asleep and dazed from medication when Malfoy walked into the infirmary, her conversation with Neville playing on the inside of her brain. And she decides, when he walks past and yanks her blanket over her cold toes while making a comment about ugly feet, that she has forgiven Draco Malfoy.

She was not a hypocrite, or at least does not want to be. She can not be a killer, and hold now faded prejudices against him. To harbor some grudge because he once, almost, just nearly killed a man himself before turning his back on old causes and trying to make up for his mistakes.

Draco Malfoy doesn't believe in God, and so she thinks that maybe it was she that was the one who needed to forgive him, so he can forgive himself.

Eleven

Day: 1216; Hour: 4

"Thanks for the food."

He looks looked up, startled by her voice, from whatever it was he's writing. "What food?"

"That you left on the porch."

He stares blankly back at her. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're on about, Granger. I think you may have really done some damage when you hit that wall the other day."

She smiled at him, which seems to disturb him, but she let him play dumb. No one else had known she would have need of any, and if it was one of the spontaneous food drop-offs the Ministry made, they would have brought it inside. She knew it could have been no one else, but Malfoy walks too close to the side of the good to not want to seem as if he strays a bit from it as well. It isn't in his character to be the nice guy, or *want* to be the nice guy, so she let him think he's as horrible as he wants to believe -- at least about this. Though she's still smiling at him, which is likely grinding that whole plan to a halt.

"Don't give me that smile."

"What?"

"That..." He waves his pen at her. "That slightly deranged grin you give people to let them know you're pleased, when you really look as if you're about to murder them."

"I do not!"

"You do. I shuddered every time I saw you aiming it at Potter or the rest of your friends across the Great Hall."

"Who knew a smile could scare the big, bad Draco Malfoy."

He glowers. "I didn't say it *scares me*, I said it looks like you're mad."

"Which scares you."

"Trust me, Granger, it'll take a whole lot more from you then that."

Someone snorts behind her, and she finds it's Neville when he throws himself down onto the couch. "Wait until you see her excited dance."

"I do not have an excited dance." She glares.

"She does. She waves her arms about, hops around on her feet, and--"

Hermione is blushing madly. "Shut up, Neville. I do no such thing."

Malfoy looks incredibly amused. "Go on then, Granger. Show us your little dance."

"Little dance?" Lavender asks from the doorway. "Oh, Hermione, remember Fifth year, when we tried to get you to learn that striptease, like in that book Parvati bought?"

"Oh, God," Hermione whispers, looking toward the two men thoroughly interested in the new development. "Which I *didn't.*"

"No. But you--"

"Alright, I'm hungry. Is anyone hungry? I've got to eat something. I'm feeling quite hungry." Hermione mutters rapidly, making a break for the kitchen.

"No, no, no. Let's hear about this--" Malfoy moves to grab her and she takes off at full speed from the living room, laughter echoing behind her.

Malfoy follows her down the hall, Lavender's explanation to Neville fading under the sound of their footfalls, and he grabs her before she can reach one of the open bedroom doors. She squeaks as he grips her waist, pulling her out of the doorway and turning her around. She expects more teasing, but all she gets is a quirk of a smile as he pins her to the doorframe.

"What," she breathes as he leans forward, "are you doing?"

"Stripping in the girls dorm with your roommates, Granger? Color me surprised."

"Color you *blue* if you don't let go of me this second. And I did not strip. I gave

opinions when *they* did. And no one got naked, I'll have you know, so…so…no. No, no. We can't." She whispers as his lips brush hers, but he ignores her, claiming her mouth fully.

She gives in for a second, four, ten, and then pushes him away. "You're amusing when you're embarrassed, do you know that?"

"They're coming, and we--"

"They're not." He kisses her again, and she sighs heavily, her heart thundering. She can't enjoy it like this though, and so she pushes him away again, shaking her head. "Do you sleep alone?"

"What?" she blurts.

"In your room. Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"I'll meet you there."

"What? Now?" She is flustered, confused, and he must find this amusing as well.

"Later, twit. When they've gone to bed."

"Oh, no. No, I can't--"

"You can." He grabbed her chin, kisses her again, and then turns back for the living room.

Day: 1216; Hour: 22

She waited anxiously, pacing, trying to read, writing a line of a letter, taking a shower, trying to read again. When there is a light tapping at her door, she was just as startled by it as if she hasn't been expecting anyone at all. And even though she had spent the past three hours telling herself to keep the light off and pretend to sleep, she has left it on and moves to the door to open it.

He strides in, far too slowly for people doing things secretly she thinks, and she closes the door quickly and quietly behind him. She locks it and turns, finding him examining his surroundings.

"I've been in here before." She raises her wand, pausing, before casting a silencing charm at his words. Sometimes she has to think and remember that magic is allowed at Headquarters because of its location, because she gets too used to being in Muggle safe houses.

She takes a breath and nods. "Yes. When you were injured."

"The infirmary was full." He looks at her and she nods again, watching as he peels his shirt off. "Going to judge this too?"

"Ha. I was young. It was the only way to make them stop hounding me about doing it myself."

He shrugs, pulling on the string of her pajama pants to urge her toward him. "It could have proved useful."

"I don't see how."

"Like now, for example." He pulls up the hem of her shirt, waiting for her to raise her arms before taking it off all the way.

"I'm perfectly capable of stripping myself." She huffs.

"You'll have to show me sometime," he whispers, a hot hand at her back. It seemed to be the end of their close-to-polite conversation, their mouths too busy with the others to be of much use with words.

He takes her on the bed, fast this time and much harder than he had been last week. The bed creaks in protest under their weight and the furious snapping of their hips. He roughly thumbs her clit, his tongue swirling against the sweat on her neck. This is much different, and though she does not like it at first, it grows on her the more her need for release escalates.

He stops the quickness of his speed suddenly, drawing in and out of her at a pace so slow it is near torturous. His fingers are still working madly at her, his other hand braced against the bed as he pushes himself up and looks down at her. She does not like the distance, the absence of his upper body's skin against hers, and she huffs in frustration as she tries to pull him back down.

"I…that… Why are you going so slow?"

He smirks, a breath of laughter, and bent his head to lick around the pebbled

surface of her nipple. "Wrap your legs around me, Granger."

She blinks and does so, skin sliding slick against the sweat on his back and waist. He's deeper, it seems, when he pushes into her again, and she arches up to meet him. She was not sure how to take the difference of this encounter compared to the first, but it was not bad, just not what she had expected. The tightness in her womb had been winding quickly, and now it felt more constricted, slower, and she was beginning to enjoy this nearly just as much.

He raised his head, hot kisses on her neck and her mouth, and she tightens her legs with a moan when he circles and flicks her clit. "Faster, Draco."

"I want to feel you come. I want to feel you clamp down around me," he whispers, deep and raspy, tracing the seam of her lips with his tongue until she opens her mouth.

"I just…" She moans again, closer and closer now, and his pace begins to build again. She kisses him back like an afterthought; too connected to her impending climax, and the harder she digs her heels, the faster he seems to go.

She pulled her mouth from his, too close now to be able to kiss him at all. She grips his head as he moves it to breathe roughly against her cheek, her other hand clamping the bottom of the arm resting near her ear. It breaks suddenly, exploding within her, and she's probably suffocating him against her face but she can't move to stop it. She'll never get over just how good this feels. His own moan joins hers like an undercurrent as his body locks, falling on top of her just seconds after she collapses back onto the bed from the arch her body had risen into. The entire house could burst in, and she still wouldn't move from her position under him.

She breathes out shakily, slowly releasing her death grip on him, the movements of their stomachs in sync as they both pant for air. He's the first to pull himself together, pushing up shakily, but her body is still trembling and she still doesn't want to move. She opens her eyes however, his looking down at the hand on her hip as he pulls out of her. She makes a face at the feel of it, the liquid that comes with it, but his facial expression remains the same.

Malfoy looks younger post-orgasm. With his cheeks colored, and his face covered with a sheen of a sweat, and his damp hair sticking up every which way. His eyes are clear, clear grey, and she wonders if the plain brown of her own looks any different as well.

"I have a mission."

"Okay," she cracks, and he looks back up at her for a few silent moments before moving to place a chaste kiss on her shoulder.

It is her turn to watch him move from the bed and get dressed, and she wonders if he had ever felt as uncomfortable watching her naked self walk around the room as well. She doesn't think so. He looks different when he is not aroused, and she makes sure he isn't looking at her before further inspecting his assets. It's an odd feeling that takes root in her gut, and she isn't sure what she feels or how she should feel, but it's a little different from this side of the bed. To be the one left, rather than the one leaving. She dislikes it just as much.

She pulls the blanket over her, just for now, because she will shower once he leaves. He's pulling up his pants, leaving them unbuttoned, a trail of golden hair disappearing into the blue band of his boxers. He finds his shirt in the corner, tugging it on.

"You'll do well." She thinks he may need to hear this with the determined look that has come over his face now.

"Perhaps."

"You will."

He runs a frustrated hand through his hair. "Don't fucking talk to me about it. I don't want to talk about that shit."

She blinked in surprise, shakes her head and shrugged. "Okay, yeah…sorry."

Day: 1218; Hour: 8

"You know what's strange?" Cho asks, Hermione sitting beside her as she tries to cast simple spells with the three remaining digits of her left hand. The thumb of her right is useless, unaccompanied by fingers, and buried under gauze seeped in potions.

"What?" Hermione prepares herself for care, advice, and sympathy, because she thinks it's going to be something deeper than temperature.

"How if it's sixty degrees outside at night in the summer, we think it's kind of nice out. But on that same summer night, if you walk into a restaurant that sixty degrees, we think it's freezing."

Hermione shrugs. "Humidity outside -- that plays a factor. And it's expectations. We know we're exposed to the elements outside. Inside, we expect to be more cocooned."

"Sort of like people." At Hermione's confused look, Cho continues. "People are harder outside, their facade, because they know they are exposed to the world there. But they don't let people in easily, because they want to be cocooned there. They want to feel safe, at ease -- not like they have to prepare for the next storm or drop in temperature. You know?"

"Yeah." She shrugs again. "It's a nice metaphor."

"So what do you do when you feel exposed both ways? When you're afraid of yourself, and your own life?"

"You wait to wake up," Hermione mutters, remembering Malfoy's words about the fallout, about handling everything one at a time.

"What?"

"You ride it out, Cho. We can survive ourselves, as long as we hold onto the desire to want to." She picks up Cho's wand, fallen and forgotten on the bed and presses it into her hand again. "We owe ourselves that much."

Day: 1218; Hour: 20

It was half past one when he knocked on her door, looking at her silently once she opened it, before finally explaining that he had seen her light on. The rest played out in rapid succession, until she found herself once again shattered to bits and smushed under him. She stands near the door and watches him dress, having extricated himself from the bed once she informed him she was going to take a shower and go to bed. She feels, strangely enough, that she is kicking him out, but she knows this was what he prefers and he doesn't look bothered by it.

"I can't find my sock, so just..."

"Oh, well that should appease my foot fetish perfectly."

He laughs, fully and outright, and she can't even help but grin back at him from the sound of it. He looks like a very different man when he's thrown into laughter, and she likes the lines around his mouth and the way his eyes squint.

"Taking to sniffing socks, are you?"

"Oh, yes. Nothing excites me more."

He grins and shakes his head, pulling his shirt back on. "Keep it then. I'm sure it'll be of more use for you than me."

"Perhaps you'll be able to find the matching one now." Hermione nods to his blue sock, knowing the other was white.

"I've no time to match socks."

Hermione shrugs a bare shoulder out of the cover of the sheet wrapped around her, deciding not to lecture about matching socks; she finds the quirk cute, though she will never tell him as much. He looks at her oddly then, the smile gone from his face, and she blushes as his eyes slowly travel the length of her body down, and up again.

"You're showering?"

She glowers at him. "Yes, yes, Malfoy, I know I look a fright. You don't exactly look polished either. And need I remind you *who*, exactly, managed to get me..."

She trails off as he looks like he might be trying to keep himself from laughing. "I look less than polished, do I? Perhaps I should take a shower as well then."

She gives him her best suspicious look before sniffing and making for the door. "Well I've already called the one up here, Malfoy, so you can go downstairs or wait."

He looks slightly confused when she glances at him as she turns from the doorway and toward the bathroom, but she ignores him, scurrying quickly in case anyone decides to step out of their own bedrooms. It isn't until later, when she is in her stripped bed, that she thinks he might have meant to *join her*. Which isn't exactly something that lets her fall asleep while thinking about.

Day: 1220; Hour: 17

Malfoy, Neville, and an old man she doesn't know look up at her when she enters the safe house. She had thought it was empty given the lack of lights, and the fact that it is only a little past eight; though she can't say she isn't happy with the development. She hates to be alone, and she hasn't seen Malfoy in two days. Her current stress could be relieved through arguing or sex, she didn't much care, just

as long as she felt better after it.

Neville stands the second he recognizes her, his face pallid, and she knows she must look worse than what she is. "Are you alright?"

Hermione throws a hand up, waving it in a way she hopes says she's okay, because she didn't much feel like she was. She had killed a person today, and it was Marcus Flint. It was an entirely different feeling, so much *worse* than it *already* was, when it is someone that you know.

"Are you hurt? Do you need help?" The old man sounds calm but clipped.

Her boots tread dark red mud across the old, worn wood of the floor, and her fingers feel numb as they struggle with the clasp of her cloak. "I'm fine."

"You're bleeding, Granger."

She looks to Malfoy and exhales heavily, phlegm rattling in her chest as she throws her cloak to the floor. "I don't *care* if I'm fucking bleeding!"

His eyebrows raise, but this is his only reaction, turning his head to follow her progress through the room. Neville trails after her, gingerly picking up her cloak.

"You're not hurt badly, are you?"

"No."

"Do you want some tea?"

"No."

"Anything?"

"Shower," she whispers, heading down the hall, and leaves Neville nervously shifting at the end of it.

She does not know how long she stands in the shower, boiling hot to ease the ache of her joints and tired muscles. She washes her hair, she stands, she washes her body, she stands. The heat of water is always enough to make her tired, and she waits for that now.

The door to the bathroom creaks open, the hinges rusted, and Hermione stares

wide-eyed at the shower curtain. "I'm *in* here."

Her wand is on the side of the sink, and her clothes are in a pile by the toilet. If all else fails, she thinks she will beat them with shower curtain pole. "I think it's time to get out, Granger."

Her fear turns to annoyance. "Get out of the bathroom."

"You know, my mother used to tell me that when your fingers start to prune, you have to get out or you'll shrink and float down the drain." She looks in the general direction of his voice, too surprised by the mention of his mother to reply at first.

"I'm fine, you know. I only have a cut. I just…need to get tired."

"I know you're fine, but Longbottom seems to think you're drowning in your blood in there."

"Why didn't he come in then?"

"I told him I would. Gryffindors seems to have issues when it comes to coming too close to naked women."

"Jesus, Malfoy, do you know how suspicious that looks?"

"Granger?"

"What?"

"He doesn't really give a shit."

She pauses. "You *told* him?"

"Of course not. But I'm not exactly his biggest enemy anymore, and frankly, he's too busy shagging men to worry about who you happen to be shagging."

"Neville is not gay!"

"Alright."

She gives an unsure look to the blue blob on the shower curtain. "He's gay?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well...no, but--"

"There you go then. I'm opening the curtain."

"What? No!" she shrieks, and she thinks he's laughing on the other side.

The hand that had invaded the small space of the shower reaches for the knobs instead of the curtain, and when he finds the small lever on the tub tap, he pulls it up. Her wonderful source of heat disappears from the showerhead to the tap, and his hand makes quick work of shutting that off too.

"Come on then. I've already got a towel."

"Is it the blue one?"

"...No."

"I like the blue one."

"Granger, just get the fuck out of the shower."

She huffs and peels back the curtain enough to stick her head out and look at him, his hands holding out an unfolded pink towel. He shakes it and raises his eyebrows at her.

"Are you leaving now?"

"Come on."

"When you leave."

"Granger..." His tone was a warning, and she didn't think he was going to leave no matter how many times she told him to.

"Shut your eyes at least."

He looks at her as if he can't believe she's serious, but does as she says when she remains standing where she is and staring at him. She thinks she can hear a muttered *ridiculous*, but ignored him in favor of snatching the towel and wrapping it around her. Once it's safely secured, she leaves her haven and gives him a glare, swiping her wand off the sink.

She looks down at the soft wave of magic it sends spiraling up her arm, and she stares at it for a very long time. "I killed Marcus Flint today. Do you remember him?"

She looks up then, because she knows he will. Because Flint had been in his House, had been his Quidditch captain, and there was no way he cannot remember. Malfoy stares back at her until she was afraid he will be angry with her over the news, but he raises his hand instead, another towel held in it.

"There's no use for a towel if you're just going to let that animal on top of your head keep showering you."

She glares at him, but there's no heat behind it, snatching the towel from his hand and bringing it to her dripping head. When she lowers it, her hair modestly damp, her arms get stuck on his chest from his new closeness. His fingers slide across her jaw, his thumb reaching up to skim the cut along her cheekbone.

"We do what we have to do. You rally for fucking house-elves, Granger. You're not a murderer."

And she hopes that now that he's kissing her, he cannot tell that she's crying. If he can, he ignores it, pulling her against him, her heat to his coldness. It isn't until she can't think properly that he leads her from the bathroom with a whisper that no one will see them, and takes her to the room he is staying in.

Malfoy likes rougher sex, she thought. He likes a lot of foreplay, but he likes his sex fast and hard. The second time they had sex, she could have put off the roughness to mood or the moment, but the time after that, and thereafter, meant it was likely a habit or a preference.

He had known she was a virgin, even though she hadn't told him. He was likely clued in with her initial refusal of taking it too far, as well as her awkwardness and how unsure on everything she was. That's why he had been gentler, more careful the very first time. And this knowledge made her look at him with a softer point of a view. Malfoy is not a cruel person, or out to purposely hurt much of anyone anymore. He could have taken her virginity any way he wanted to, and he chose the best way for her rather than the way he preferred it. And she appreciated that, and him for it, in a way she didn't understand fully.

"Slower," she whispers this time, unsure of where she finds the gall to do so, but he listens, ever attentive, and it's exactly what she needs.

Twelve

Day: 1221; Hour: 5

Hermione and Neville eye each other from across the expanse of the living room, and Hermione knows that *he* knows what it is she had done last night. Or, *who*, really.

"You're gay."

"You're having sex with Draco Malfoy."

"Even, then?"

"Secret, then?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Good."

"Great."

Day: 1224; Hour: 16

"I thought this war was almost over three months ago."

"When it's over, you'll know it."

"Who do you miss the most?" Hermione focuses her attention on his reflection in the window rather than what's going on outside of it, though he doesn't seem willing to respond. "I miss my parents. At least I *hear* from Ron and Harry sometimes, and know they are safe and okay. But my parents…"

"Your mother thinks I have beautiful teeth."

"What?" She isn't sure if she heard him correctly, though if she did, her voice sounds astonished enough for it.

"At Kings Cross, after…Fourth year? Fifth, maybe. She told me I had beautiful teeth, and asked me what wizarding procedures I use."

"Oh, Jesus." Hermione covers her face, imagining just how Draco must have acted toward a Muggle at that age.

"You look a lot like her, you know," he mutters as an afterthought, and she slides her hand down enough to look at his reflection again.

"I know. My family tells me that that is what I have to look forward to."

"It's not bad, for an older woman."

"Find my mother attractive, do you?" Her laugh bubbles up no matter how much she tries to shove it down.

He glares at the back of her head, she sees, before looking back at her reflection. "I meant that you don't have much to be self-conscious about, even old, despite how adamant you are about being that way now."

"I am not self-conscious."

"Right."

She looks back at the trees, whipping around in the wind as if they might topple at any second, searching for a change of topic. "Well at least you don't have to worry about graying. Your hair is already white."

"Ha ha."

She hadn't meant it as an insult, and speaks before she can think about not. "I like it."

When she got up the nerve to look at his reflection again, he's staring thoughtfully back at her. He tucks his hands into his pockets and crosses the three steps to her, his shirt just touching the back of hers.

"See those two stars up there? Directly ahead, up…see them? Larger, and the smaller one diagonal to the left of it?"

"Yes." She was hesitant, unsure where he is going with this.

"They call the larger star Hestia, and the smaller one Salvatore. The story goes that Salvatore was one of the first men to be tried for witchery in Great Britain, and he was locked away after finding him guilty. He was supposed to be burned that night, when Hestia, a Muggle deeply in love with the concept of magic, snuck down to his cell and broke him free. Salvatore took shelter in the woods, Hestia promising to bring him food for his journey away from the town. When she never showed, Salvatore snuck back into town under the cover of night."

"Why would he risk it?"

"He thought there must have been something wrong, and there was. The towns' people found out that Hestia had released him, and sentenced her to the stake herself. Salvatore tried to stop them, but he was overpowered despite his magical capability, and was placed on the stake they erected beside Hestia. Knowing that the girl would die in vain, and all just to save his life, he felt he owed a Wizarding Debt to the Muggle."

"But he was losing his life. They both would die anyway."

"Hmm. The story says that Salvatore performed a spell, of old magic, and so powerful that they were birthed as stars before the fire ever reached their bodies. Legend goes that Salvatore vowed to look after Hestia and all Muggles in her honor, for the rest of eternity. The Muggle," he points to the larger one, pushing against her now, and then raises his finger to the smaller, "and The Great Protector."

"The protector of Muggles?"

"Indeed." She is silent, leaning back as nonchalantly as possible to rest against him, and he lowers his head to whisper into her ear. "Granger…Moody keeps files on all the Muggles they have hidden. I'm sure if you want to see how they are, you might be able to find a way within that story."

She turns her head, looking at what she can see of him in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"No. I driveled on about that for absolutely no reason at all."

"So you know the password?"

"I might."

"What is it?"

"A secret."

"But you already…" She leaves it be when the annoyance flashes on his face. He has already given her more than he should, and she does not want to seem less than thankful for that. "Thank you."

He shrugs, backing away. "I suggest you do some research. It's not that obvious. People *and* places share names."

She is about to question just what he means by that, but it's a hint she thinks, and resolves to read up on the story as soon as possible. When she turns around, he is already gone.

Day: 1225; Hour: 18

"You know what I think?"

"That's an impossible question." He looks up at her from his bowl as she not-so-secretly steals a handful of his popcorn.

"I think it's the smaller things in life that change us the most. That are the most profound. Like me meeting Harry and Ron, like you meet all people in life, or how my mum bought me a simple book that I adored and learned how to love reading from. Just the small things."

"Well if they are such profound impacts on your life, then wouldn't they be counted as the 'bigger' things? It's not judged by how extreme it is, it is judged by how much it affects everything."

Hermione chews thoughtfully on her popcorn. "I haven't got the theory all worked out yet."

"Right." He gives a short grin, as if he were about to laugh but it didn't reach his mouth, and turns back to the television.

"Know what else I think?"

"That stealing my popcorn is a good idea? Because it isn't. I spit in that."

She gives him a look before going back to chewing happily. "I think you'll always be a prat."

"Because I won't let you have the remote?"

"Just because you are."

"Good. Because I think you'll always be a bitch."

She ignores him. "But at least I can tolerate you more now."

"I think the intonation of your voice will just grow more tiresome the longer I know you."

"I think you can't live a second without insulting someone."

"I think you can't inhale without thinking you're better than everyone else doing it."

She snorts. "I think you can't go a day without your little facade, and brooding."

"Facade? I think you can't go a minute without analyzing everything to death, or jumping to wrong conclusions and believing them wholeheartedly."

"I think you're a--"

"I think this bickering just further proves how immature you are."

"Me? I was being nice. You're the one who started it." He gives her a meaningful look, and she rolls her eyes at him.

"And I didn't start it, actually. What was that again? You think I'll always be a prat? If that's your idea of a compliment, love, it's no wonder men are scared to date you."

She glares at him, ramming a finger into his arm. "Men are *not* scared to date me -- talk about jumping to wrong conclusions. And the way you parade around like an utter prat all the time, I would think you *would* take it as a compliment. No one does something so much when they're ashamed of it. If we're taking low blows here, you--"

"So you're proud of being bossy, annoying, and judgmental?"

"I am not judgmental."

"Fine, let's say you aren't -- which you are -- you're proud of being bossy and annoying?"

She is silent long enough to let him smirk smugly at her. "Well?"

"Touche, then, Malfoy," she bites.

"You know, you wouldn't have been so offended with the comment on dating if it wasn't the truth."

She *was* offended. A person does not go as long as she has without dating men and not thinking there might be something wrong with her. She is sensitive to the issue, like a nerve, and he stomped all over it.

She glares at him and stands up, content to head for the bedroom she is staying in and continue reading the book she found on constellations. He makes a sound behind her, too close to amusement not to anger her more, and the bowl of popcorn scuffs against the table when he sets it down.

"Is this how you handle confrontation? Walk away?"

"I don't feel like sitting next to you anymore," she replies, because she was more hurt than angry, and too much showing of either will just prove to him how effected by it she was.

He grabs her wrist, which makes her jump, because she hadn't even heard him get off the couch. He tugs her back when she keeps walking, trying to pull her wrist from his grasp, and his other hand comes around to grab her hip. He turns her back around, eyebrow arched.

"Since when do you walk away from your problems?"

She lifts her chin. "I don't feel like talking anymore, Malfoy. I have things to do."

"You said you were tired of reading."

"I said I was taking a break. I have."

"It takes a certain sort of person to deal with you, do you know that? Most men don't want to date you, because you're intimidating."

"Then maybe you should let go of me."

He smirks, dipping his head. "You don't scare me, Granger."

"I have free access to your private bits right now," she warns.

"Yes," he whispers, hot breath on her lips, "you do."

She blushes as he kisses her, glad he can't see it, but she makes him work for her to kiss him back, because she's still angry. He pulls her toward him, and she feels him hardening against her stomach in anticipation of what he wants. It propels her to raise her free hand to his hair, and she kisses him back with more anger than she feels, just for the sake of taking it out on him.

When he finally releases her mouth, she's backed against the back of the couch, his hand up her shirt and her hands throwing his own shirt to the side after he had half lifted it off him in the first place.

"I like you like this, Granger. You lose control in a way I've never seen. I think because you keep everything bottled up, and you can't when you're like this -- especially close to climax or when you come. Does wonders for the male ego, you know."

"Like you need yours any larger." She tries to play it off, but she's blushing again; it is one thing to have sex with him, and a complete other to *talk* about it.

Malfoy likes to talk a lot she has noticed. He likes to talk during foreplay, during sex. The only time he's more mum about things is after. Then again, one of them usually leaves while they are both still reeling.

He grabs her head, kissing her again, and she pulls back just long enough to say, "Room."

"Mhm," he hums, his hands creeping to her bum to pull her against him again, and he begins to lead her on a hazardous and blind stumble toward the nearest empty bedroom.

Day: 1228; Hour: 10

She has to wait four days before Grimmauld Place was cleared out enough that she felt safe enough to risk it. The house was never completely empty, and was deemed Headquarters by many because of its constant busy state with officials and top Order members always in residence.

The Sneakoscopes were currently locked away somewhere, which she had also waited for. Moody usually took as many precautions as he could, but whenever the Weasley twins were at Grimmauld, the detecting devices were shut out, as they constantly went off.

His office was protected by a password, but Hermione knew it because Harry did, his door always open for emergencies and just-in-case's when it concerns Harry. It is the Muggle filing cabinet that she is worried about, locked away in Moody's closet. She will have to break through the wards on the closet and the locks on the cabinet, and though she has been preparing herself for this and trusts her gut and knowledge, one never knows where Moody is concerned. One wrong move might not only get her busted, but it could very well curse her with some disease or injure her quite severely.

The wards on the closet take her seventeen minutes, and her heart threatens revolt more and more with each passing second of it. She simply stares at the filing cabinet for a solid thirty seconds before she even allows herself to breathe. She has studied, and practiced this for hours on end to make sure she got it perfect, but there is always doubt there when what she knows is not confirmed.

She waves her wand in a complicated pattern that makes her wrist ache from awkward angles and positioning, whispering the possible password as loudly as she dares. People and places share names, he had said, and he should have just *told* her the password for all it was worth, once she found out the history of The Muggle and The Great Protector. She found it no coincidence that the name of the town and the middle name of Hestia were the same.

She tries the handle on the first drawer with a shaky hand, and it doesn't open. She makes a small, pathetic noise before trying for the second, and grinning like mad when it pulls out. Her parents folder is in the third, the lone G's, and she isn't sure if her heart beats at all once she opens it.

Muggles who are put in hiding are interviewed once a month to make sure they are safe, stable, and adjusting, and Hermione reads like she is a child just discovering the power of words. They are fine, it seems, both of them questioning the interviewer on the magical world more than the interviewer is able to question them. They are worried about her, and this makes a knot fill up her throat, but they are safe and perfectly all right.

She savors every word like it is her own conversation with them, hastily swiping her tears as they get in the way of what she is looking at. She takes comfort in this, more than she thought she could, and she thanks Malfoy over and over inside her

head.

Day: 1230; Hour: 5

She passes Malfoy and a group of Aurors in the lobby of the Ministry, and smiles that insane and pleased grin he seems to dislike so much. He gives her a look that makes her want to laugh, because it is so classically him. She wonders if he has a clue as to why he's on the receiving end of her happiness, but she knows he is more intelligent than she ever gave him credit for in the past, and he will figure it out.

Day: 1235; Hour: 16

Hermione balls her cloak into her mouth, stifling the deep coughing that overtakes her when a wave of smoke breaks into the small room. The Auror on the floor clamps his mouth shut, his body heaving with the motions of coughing that he refuses to sound. Screaming rises from outside the old wooden walls, and Hermione can see Lee Jordan drag a writhing Colin Creevey behind a shop through one of the holes.

"Bring them," the Auror pauses, coughing blood, and wheezing in more air. "Bring a team through the woods to the East. Head North thirty meters in. You'll find a cave... Exit it at the mouth to the North, and leave two there in case anyone follows. Lead the rest South, through the woods, and attack from behind."

"But--"

"They're going to corner us if we don't. We only have half a kilometer more before we hit the stone wall at the end of the village."

"Alright. Okay," Hermione whispers, and the Auror gives her a hard nod before taking the Portkey out, the light from the cracks now shimmering over dusty beaten floors.

Hermione exits quickly, throwing hexes and curses the moment she clears safety. It takes her longer than it should have taken to try and convince Katie or Neville to lead the team instead. They are unmoving; they all know that whoever goes is going to be safer, and that whoever stays with even less people have very small odds of surviving more than ten minutes. In the end she goes because there is no one else and too little of time, taking as few as possible, and all out running for the tree line.

She pushes them to be quick, knowing the others need them to be, and feels as if she might vomit the entire time. She isn't a leader. She is not used to people looking

toward her for their every direction while in such a dangerous situation, and she feels the weight of lives like the biggest burden in her life.

But the Auror's plan is flawless. Three Death Eaters follow them into the woods, two of them taken care of in short order, and she leaves two members of her team behind to get the last. The rest of them break into arrow formation, running from the trees and into the village square they had last left.

It is a half an hour in time, minutes to her head, and hours to her tired body before they begin to feel the likeliness of their win burn their guts, and it is a beautiful thing -- the freedom that comes with the birth of hope.

Thirteen

Day: 1237; Hour: 20

"I heard you didn't fuck up a mission for once."

"Oh, piss off."

He gives her a suspicious look when she smiles as she says it, the reminder of the success resurfacing her happiness. She knows that he can't know the details of it, but just that it's going around enough for him to know that the victory was in part to her leadership pleased her.

"It wasn't my plan." She feels as if she shouldn't take the credit for that.

"What a surprise," he drawls, in a tone reminiscent of their old Potions professor.

She gives him a sharp look now, which makes him look more settled, and he moves his bowl of peanuts away from her the moment she lifts her hand to take one. "Don't you know how to share?"

"No."

"Only child complex, then."

"Or... I just don't want your greedy little hand touching things I'm about to put in my mouth."

She raises an eyebrow at him. "Well, it's not like you..."

She trails off, deciding not to go there because it will likely embarrass her too much. He turns his head to look at her, popping a peanut into his mouth, and by the lift at the corner of his lips she knows he figured out what she was going to say anyway.

"Not like I what?"

"Never mind."

"Finish your sentence."

"No. I'm in a good mood, Malfoy, don't ruin it."

"You're the one who started the rebuttal --- all I want is for you to finish it."

"And all I want is to *not*, and since this is my mouth and my vocal chords, I guess I'm not going to."

"Do you put your hands on yourself? Hmm? In the places I put my mouth?"

"What? Look, I--"

"Masturbation, Granger. Do you masturbate?"

She flames red. "I am not talking about this with you."

"Why not? If there's anything you should be comfortable with me about now, it's sex."

"Well I'm not. So shut up."

"Granger."

"No."

"No, you don't, or no, you're not answering?" She ignores him, staring hard at the make-up infomercial they have been watching for twenty minutes now. "Show me."

"*What*?" She knows this is only going to get worse when he licks the salt off his lips and puts down his bowl, turning toward her on the couch.

"Show me how you get off when I'm not around." He licks the salt from his fingers now, long, slim digits, fingertips brushing over his tastebuds.

"But you *are* around!" she stutters.

He smirks. "We can get to that part later. For now, we'll pretend you're alone in--"

"No. I'm not comfortable doing that, Malfoy, and I'm not going to."

He pushes his tongue into his cheek, studying her for a moment. He stands then, grabbing the arms of the recliner and pulling it directly in front of her, the coffee

table separating them. She watches him curiously; unaware of what he is doing until he begins to unbutton his pants.

"Malfoy! There are... *people* here."

"It's late, and no one is awake but us."

"But..." She trails off, watching as he shoves his boxers and trousers down to his calves, half hard as he takes a seat. "Still."

"I like to take my time, unless I'm desperate to get off." He ignores her, pulling his shirt up around his shoulders as he leans back. "The more you want it, the harder you're going to come."

He rolls his nipples between his fingers, getting them hard before licking the pad of his thumbs and reaching down to pinch them. Hermione mutters to herself, her breathing already uneven as she watches him in fascination, his hands smoothing over his chest. He's already fully erect when he presses his nails into the hair below his bellybutton, scraping them all the way up and over his nipples. He watches her watch him, his eyes darkening and hooded, and his hips bouncing when he finally grips himself.

"Men are very visually-orientated, but I've been blessed with a vivid imagination. I've thought of you before we even slept together." She looks up to his eyes at the confession, before dropping them down to his slow pumping fist again. "I imagined how tight you would be, the shape of your breasts, your nipples. What you would look like when you came."

A sound forces its way from her throat, and her breath pauses altogether when he lifts his hand to lick the palm, bringing it back down again. She feels hot, breathing labored, and the ache grows more into a need the longer she looks at him. Her fingers are moving anxiously on the couch, filled with indecision as she tries to quickly determine her best action for the moment.

"I saw you spread out below me, riding me, or bent over a desk or chair while I fucked you from behind. I thought of what you must taste like, and how your body would feel slick against mine." He moans, pushing into his hand as he cups his balls. "And then when I *knew*... I got off even quicker."

He is quiet for a few seconds, his cheeks flushed and hips pumping continuously now. His feet arch, his toes spreading as he makes breathy little noises that she remembers well.

"What are you thinking of now?" she whispers to break any awkwardness from setting in for her over the fact that she is doing nothing while he…does *this*.

"Sometimes," his voice is deeper, darker as he gives a squeeze to the head of his cock, "I think about things we've already done. Usually, I think about the things I still want to do to you."

"And right now?"

He breathes out in a rush. "Your mouth on me. All hot and wet, and being buried in your throat."

She bites her lip, considering but unwilling. She has just begun to shake off the nerves of inexperience, and though it might be something she would do at some point, she isn't ready for it now. The moment feels too wrong. Instead, she stands, pulling down her knickers and sweatpants with a steadiness she had decided on two minutes ago. His hand stills momentarily, and she is blushing already, but ignores it, sitting down and pulling up her bra and shirt as he had done.

She hesitates; keeping her eyes away from him, and cups her breasts, kneading them. "Lick your fingers, Granger."

She does so, and brings them down to her nipples as he had done earlier, tweaking and rolling them between her wet digits. She tries to relax, to not go about this like it is a test, but she is ever aware of him looking at her. She has only done this in the comfort and privacy of her bedroom, and it is enough to be out in the open like this, let alone to be exposed to him while she does it.

"Spread your legs for me," he whispers, and she realizes that she has them primly shut. She takes a fortifying breath and does as he asked, rewarded with a deep groan from the other side of the room. She looks up at him then, his hand pumping fast now, his lips parted as he takes her in.

"What are you thinking now?" she asks shakily, as if it will take his attention off her at all.

"Nothing but how much I want you to bury your fingers inside yourself right now. Can you do that for me, Granger?"

She exhales and nods, dropping a hand to skim down her stomach. "Open your legs more. Wider. All the way, Granger. There you go… that's perfect."

She brushes her thumb across her clit, whining softly at how sensitive it is, and pushes a tentative finger inside herself. She hasn't done this often, maybe once every few months since she was sixteen, and not at all since she began sleeping with the man across from her. Her fingers now, she thinks, are inadequate -- they are not him in size, or motion, or depth, or feeling.

"Add another," he pants, as if he can read her thoughts, and she does, but it is still not enough, not *him*.

She pushes as deep as she can, arching her hips and pushing back against the couch, her other hand leaves her breast to squeeze the couch pillow. She tries to touch herself like he does, but her fingers are still shorter, and her thumb feels clumsy circling her clit. She pushes against her fingers, looking at his hand again, her own speeding up to match his pace unconsciously.

He comes, thick white spurts on his chest and hand as he thrusts his hips up and locks his body, his teeth sinking into his hand and barely muffling whatever word he grinds out. Her speed slows while she studies him, watching him collapse back into the seat, harshly breathing out against his hand. He catches his breath, coming down, and his eyes open slowly, directly onto her.

She feels very uncomfortable now, as if she should stop and go run and hide somewhere; embarrassed that he has finished and she is left still going at it. *Oh, God,* she thinks, and wonders if she should go make a break for her bedroom -- where she will likely still continue, because that is how *badly* she needs to get off right now. She pulls her fingers away, but they hover from further motion with the look he gives her.

"Don't you dare." His voice cracks roughly as he gives her another warning look and yanks his shirt over his head.

"But you're... done."

He glances up from wiping off his stomach and hand. "And when has that ever meant you were?"

This is true. If she hasn't gotten off and he has, he always makes sure that she does. Hermione may be new to actually *having* sex, but she's known for a while that the statistics of women who don't get off after their partners have is far too high. Malfoy has always been good about this to her, and while she never found it something to complain about before, she certainly does now.

"But--"

"I know you want to come." He stands, making his way around the table after he pulls his pants up.

"I don't--" She watches him like prey.

"Let me see," he whispers, sitting in front of her on the table. "Show me."

He runs his palms, hot and sticky, up her legs and parts them again. He looks her in the eye, and she isn't sure if this makes her more uncomfortable than it does if he just looked at where her hand was moving back to. He takes the other from the couch pillow, bringing it to his mouth, and she moans uncontrollably as he sucks two of them into his mouth. His tongue curves around them as his thumb moves in soft circles on the sensitive underside of her wrist, his eyes holding hers.

He pulls her hand away, moving it to her breast, and she misses his touch. His warmth so close to her but not touching her is teasing and aggravating, because she just wants to sink into him -- or, better, *him* sink into *her*.

"Draco," she whispers, and he sucks in a breath.

"Close your eyes."

"I want... No." Because she wants to see him, but she doesn't know if saying so is too revealing.

"Close them."

She does this time, and jerks when she feels his breath against her cheek. Her fingers move faster inside her in anticipation, and she leans forward but still doesn't touch against him. She runs his saliva over the pebbled surface of her nipples, biting her lip and exhaling hard through her nose.

"What are you thinking about right now?" he whispers, like a breath against the shell of her ear.

"You." She is honest.

"What am I doing?" She thinks he may sound pleased, and later she will laugh at the thought of telling him it was someone else.

"Not touching me," she answers sourly, and he laughs.

"How can I touch you, when I don't know where to touch you?"

"You do."

"In your imagination, Granger, are those my fingers inside of you, or your own?"

She blushes. "Yours."

"And where else am I touching you?" And she catches on to what he had meant.

"My neck. Your mouth. In that spot…here." His lips descend the second her finger leaves the spot, and she moans, pushing forward until her shoulders are against his, her forehead resting on one. "Your hand is on my breast."

He moves, cupping as she drops her own away, but he leaves it still, as if awaiting further instruction. He is making this much harder than it has to be, she thinks, and lays her hand over his, directing the motions. Her hips are moving constantly against her hand now, but it is not *enough*.

"I… I need more," she pants.

"Add another."

"That's too much, and it's not… deep enough."

"It's not too much. Add another." He bites her ear, licks around the curve. "Relax, Granger."

"I need…"

"Curve your fingers."

"What?"

"Curve them."

She does so, her breath shuttering before she moans loudly, arching against him at the new sensation. His hand leaves her breast to wrap his arm around her back, pulling her chest against his, his other hand yanking her ear to get her head back. He kisses her the moment she pulls her head off his shoulder, and she whimpers

into his mouth, so close now, her whole body moving against his as she bucks against her hand. Her free hand curves around the back of his neck, gripping for some more stability.

"That's it. Let go for me," he whispers against her mouth, kissing her again, and she grips his neck so hard her nails bite into his skin.

"I'm... I'm..." she breathes, feeling her climax creep up the lining of her stomach, and is just *so close* it hurts, before her fingers grind to a halt.

Her heart is a dead weight, like someone cursed it to stone in her chest, and she opens wide eyes to look into Malfoy's own shocked ones. He looks over her head, to the entrance to the living room, but she knows no one is there by the way his eyes dart around the rest of the area.

He pushes her back, grabbing the quilt off the back of the couch and yanking it down to her. Her heart unfreezes, beating painfully now. She knows she heard a door slam, and he must have as well, though with the calm way he was turning the recliner back around she wouldn't think so. Besides his missing shirt, his flushed skin, and his obvious arousal tenting his pants, he looks completely normal. She, on the other hand, thinks she might break out of the confinement of her skin and bones. She wonders if anyone might notice her getting herself off under the covers, because fifteen seconds ago she sure as hell did not think she could stop if even Harry burst into the room.

The ache is absolutely painful now, and she feels like crying from all the pent up feelings that she was seconds away from erupting with. Her hands are shaky, her breathing still labored, and she is close to screaming with frustration.

There's a clatter from the kitchen, followed shortly by the sound of the refrigerator closing. Hermione looks to Malfoy as the microwave pops open to find him already looking at her. He gives a glance to the doorway and stands, grabbing her arm and pulling her off the couch.

"Draco," she practically whines, yanking her shirt down. "I need... it hurts, and... I..."

"I know," he whispers, kissing her mouth before she bends to pull up her pants. "I know, come on."

He grabs her wrist and brings her to his room, the closest to the living room, and shuts the door as quietly as possible behind them. Hermione forgets all discomfort

and hesitation, shoving her pants back down as he locks the door, her legs shaking.

"Bed." He nods toward it when he turns, shoving his own pants down and kicking them off his feet as she lies back on his bed.

He doesn't waste time with taking off her shirt, sinking into her the moment he is on top of her, and *God*, this is perfect. It is exactly what she needed before she even started touching herself before. This is exactly what her fingers and hands cannot make up for, and with good reason.

She comes in seconds, crying out into the palm he pushes against her mouth, never having needed to come so badly in her life. It almost burns, the feel of it, and she clamps her legs so hard around him he's forced to stop moving.

When she comes down enough to open her eyes, he's looking at her, still moving steadily above her. She thinks to thank him for finally giving her what she needed, but remembers that he is the one who came up with the stupid idea to touch themselves in the living room in the first place. She can almost blame him for it until four minutes later, when he makes her come again, so hard she thinks she might blackout. After that, she doesn't think she can blame him for much of anything.

Later, she wakes up beside him, the light still on and dark still outside the window. They are both still the wrong way on the bed, her face buried into his shoulder and her leg thrown over his. It is the first time she's ever not left directly after sex, though this is a complete accident. She had been so worn out after their first go once they got into the room, that she didn't even realize she was passing out - until now that she is awake. He must have been in much the same state, given his current sleeping and the fact that she is still here.

She gets up, aching and drowsy, and stumbles her way into her pants. She hits the lights on her way out the door, shutting it silently behind her and tiptoeing for her own room.

Day: 1243; Hour: 8

"What... are you doing?"

Hermione looks up, pushing back to her knees as she looks up at the imposing figure in the doorway. "I'm planting flowers."

"Why?"

"I was bored." She shrugs. "I found the seeds in the drawer by the sink, and decided to plant them."

"Do they even grow in the cold?"

"I don't know."

"Then isn't it rather useless?"

"No, because I'm bored and it gives me something to do."

Malfoy leans against the door frame, scowling down at her. "You've been unnaturally chipper lately."

"Chipper?" She shrugs again. "I just feel like… everything is sort of getting on track."

"We're in the middle of a war."

"Thanks for the reminder."

"You needed to be reminded?"

"No, hence the sarcasm." He is putting her in a foul mood now, and she thinks this may have been his goal. "You know, just because you're always angry at everything, doesn't mean everyone else has to be."

"I don't care if everyone else is or not. I--"

"Good." She halts the fight that he's looking for. "Do you want to help me plant?"

"What?"

"Plant."

"No." He gives her a strange look.

"Can't get your hands dirty, Malfoy?"

"I don't *plant*."

"It won't kill you. Promise. See?"

"You can get as dirty as you like, Granger, but there's no reason to get soil all over myself for something I don't have to do."

"What if it's already on you?"

"What?"

She answers by flicking dirt at him, but gravity pulls it too hard from the shirt she was aiming for and it lands on his sock. She watches him expectantly, waiting to see if he freaks out over dirt or retaliates. He studies the small clumps and then looks back down at her, raising an eyebrow high.

"You're childish. And you're going to clean that now."

"No." She shakes her head. "I don't think I am."

"You are."

She flicks more at him. "Make me."

"Do you really want me to have to, twit?"

"Don't call me names, Malfoy. You don't want to make me angry."

"Bitch," he says petulantly, and steps back too slowly for the handful of dirt she wings at him.

She smirks and he looks up slowly from the moist soil smacked onto his shirt, glaring at her. She thinks perhaps she should stand and take to running now, but she almost never backs down from him, and this is no exception. He turns sharply, disappearing into the kitchen with a dark mutter.

"Going to shower now? Wash that pristine, pure skin of yours free from imperfection? Dirt! The horror!" She yells after him, shaking her head and returning to the patch of soil in front of her.

In Hagrid's class in one of their younger years, she remembers a time when Lavender actually *cried* when she fell back into the dirt. It only took a simple cleaning spell before she was fine again, but Hermione thinks there are some people who freak out about their appearance far too much. Malfoy used to be as perfectly put together as he could manage, and while she has seen him quite the opposite now, she guesses that some things just stay with people.

She is abruptly brought from her thoughts with a gasp, something ice cold hitting her on the top of her bent head and stomach. She is disoriented for just a second, before she looks up to find him in the doorway again, grinning and holding the empty glass in his hand.

"I thought you might want me to clean you up a little."

"Oh… *oh*, you are going to regret that!"

"Now, now, Granger -- don't make me angry," he mocks, but drops the teasing for curiosity. "What is that?"

"This," Hermione mutters, gripping it in her hand as she turns the small metal wheel quickly, "is a hose."

"A… hose."

"Didn't learn this in Muggle Studies, hmm?" She grins, and he has just enough time to register the water jetting out before he's sprayed with it.

"*Granger*!"

She cackles as he takes off from the door, and she moves closer, waiting until he's out of the kitchen to hoist herself inside. The backdoor is missing steps, and she always has to leap down to get out or pull herself up to get back inside. She creeps as silently as she can through the kitchen, her thumb tight and numb against the opening to block the water from spraying out.

She finds him in the living room, pulling what must be freezing cold fabric away from his skin, and she drops her thumb away again. He yells something about inside, and a nutter, and several curse words as he takes off for the hall. She tries to follow him, but she runs out of slack, jerking to a halt at the end of the living room. She should probably be regretting the idea to bring it inside, as not all the water had hit him and pools of wetness were on the carpet now. She doesn't though, feeling rebellious and *maybe* just a little crazy too. It is sort of like the first time she was on her own, and ate a whole bowl of pudding -- her parents would have died, and she was sick enough to think she might, but it still felt good. If her parents were here now, or any adult for the matter, she is sure she would get reamed. But what is a house that the Ministry owns, but no one really lives in? Common property, she figures. Besides, there is *revenge* that she had to get.

Malfoy seems to be in hiding, despite any taunts she throws down that hall, and

so she retreats back to the door, content in knowing that at least she got him back. She's in the kitchen by the time she stops feeling the pressure against her thumb, and she has a moment of panic, wondering if she ran up all the water in the well now. Her brief worry is put to rest when *he* walks into her line of sight, staring up at her smugly.

"How did you get out there?" He doesn't answer her, yanking the hose suddenly, and it comes easily from her grasp. She squeaks and dives for it, but he pulls it out the door, running to turn it back on. "Hey! No! Draco Malfoy, put--"

She gives up on speaking when he gets the water on, turning to run out of the kitchen, and screaming her throat hoarse when the water hits her. *Jesus*, she hadn't known it was *that* cold when she sprayed him. He's quicker than she had been, the water soaking her nearly the entire time she runs to the hallway. Her back feels frozen, her clothes like a second skin, yet nearly completely dry in the front.

Hermione runs for the front door like he must have, knowing the man will probably wait forever there in dead silence so she thinks he left and she'll come out again. She'll use his own little tricks on him instead, determined for payback now. Though, if she thinks about, she figures they are actually *even* now, but there's no way she's letting him get the last shot.

He seems just as determined, given that he's standing and waiting for her in the backyard when she turns the corner. "Predictable much?"

She yells as he grins, covering half the hole with his thumb so it sprays a greater distance. She wonders *how* he managed to figure that out so quickly -- it took her until she was eleven.

"Stop! Not in the *face*! I didn't get you in the face!" She yells, trying to outrun him.

"Because you're not as crafty."

"Slytherin!" she huffs.

"Thank you."

She glares at him and switches tactics, turning her feet from their set motion of running back around the house and aiming her direction toward him. She covers her face with her arm and all out runs, skidding through mud when she gets near him. She is shaking with the cold, and he has to grip the hose with both hands when she

tries to yank it away.

"This is cute, Granger." He laughs, turning it toward her head despite all her attempts at him not.

She goes for something different, stomping a foot down on top of it and cutting off the water. She gives him a triumphant look as he stares at her and tilts the hose. She takes advantage of his momentary surprise, shoving the hole toward his face and lifting her foot, laughing maniacally as it shoots him in the face. He spits water and turns it away from him, and she clamps down on the hose again for just two seconds before he yanks her off of it. He fastens an arm around her shoulders, pinning her arms, pulling her back against him as he puts the hose in her face. She screams, but it's just a gurgle of water as she tries turning her head away and forces all her weight back onto him in a shove.

It's enough to unbalance him in the mud, and he takes them both down, his oxygen whizzing past her ear as he grunts. She takes the opportunity given to her by her less severe fall and breaks from his grip, turning and grabbing a handful of mud. It squishes between her fingers before she smacks it onto his forehead, rubbing it into his hair with childish glee. He stares up at her in shock, and she grins wickedly before getting a face full of the stuff herself. She reels for a moment before she's revved with retaliation, jumping off of him as he sits up, and throwing another fistful at him.

The hose falls forgotten as they both struggle to stand with slippery feet, throwing as much mud at one another as possible. She makes a break for the front of the house, and he follows after her, wiping the mud off her own skin and flinging it back when she runs out. He must be doing the same, several more clumps hitting her in the back and her hair even after she is inside the house again, crying out when she feels a slight tug on her shirt. She breaks free but only for a second longer, her feet are pulled out from under her, and she hits the floor on her hands with a thud.

She tries to crawl forward, but he only pulls her back, moving quickly to hover over her, and she turns to face him when she acknowledges that there is no escape. He's looking around the kitchen, his hands pinning her shoulders as he searches for a weapon, but he focuses back onto her when she bursts into laughter.

"So... *ridiculous*!" she howls about the way he looks and the past fifteen minutes in general.

His hair is brown, matted to his head, and he looks as if he must have painted his

face in mud, only small streaks of white showing through. He sneers down at her, and she laughs harder at the brown on his teeth, waving her hands like a white flag and dropping fully onto the floor in defeat.

"You've been doing Muggle drugs, haven't you? All happy suddenly, planting, attacking people with water and mud. I've heard of marijuana you know. Is that what you were planting?"

She continues laughing, and when he realizes that he's not getting through to her, he rolls and drops down next to her to catch his breath. She calms after a few minutes, her cheeks hurting, and lolls her head to look at him.

"That was... so childish. But I swear that was the most fun I've had in so long."

"I'm scarred, I think."

She grins and shakes her head, watching him look at the ceiling. "I never thought you could be like that."

He looks at her now, rolling his head to face her, and she thinks his eyebrows are raised but can't tell with how dirty his face is. "Like what?"

"Joking around. Acting like an idiot -- well, wait..." He glares at her, and she laughs. "You know what I mean. Just act... like that."

"Self-defense."

"Sure." She lets him have it, knowing it won't do for him to seem like a normal person who acts like a fool once in a while. "I'm freezing."

"You're the one who decided to use the hose at the end of Fall."

"Self-defense."

He grins, turning his head away and looking back at the ceiling. "Sure."

Day: 1250; Hour: 16

She spends two days with Ginny, and almost tells her everything every ten minutes. She is afraid though, and ashamed in a way she hasn't been before. It is one thing to know what you're doing and like it enough to keep going, and another to tell someone about it when you know they will only point out why it's such a bad

idea.

He is different now, she would like to tell her. In a sort of way she hasn't completely grasped, but in a way that makes her okay with what it is they are doing. There is something about Malfoy that pulls her, intrigues her. She wonders if this is the sort of thing people feel when they are addicted to drugs -- if perhaps this is wrong, and she should stop, but she just hasn't reached the bottom yet to be able to pull away.

Sometimes, when she hasn't seen him for a few days, she says it out loud to herself and laughs, because it seems so preposterous. Other times, she wonders what she would be doing if he was there and she was not alone.

Fourteen

Day: 1256; Hour: 1

Her breathing is mirrored across from her, Lavender's trainer digging into her leg as the other girl adjusts herself in the tiny room. They can feel the Death Eaters walking past the door more than they can hear them, and she tries to make her breath soundless, but she hears it too loudly for it to be working. Her heart feels frozen in a twist, the adrenaline pumping along her shoulders. She can't believe just how close they came to being found by the group of them, and knows without a doubt there would be no escaping this place alive if they had been.

"Hermione?" Lavender whispers, and it's *too loud* still, Hermione's fear strengthening sounds and movement, until she is sure they will blow down the door with a motion of her finger.

"Huh?" Hermione asks, just a breath with a little more pressure than normal, her eyes darting in the darkness to where she knows the door is.

"Do you... Do you ever think of just...not going back? Like... Like we could stay here, and just not go back. I have family in other countries, and places I can go. We can just...hide. Do you ever think about it?"

"No."

Lavender is silent, which is good, but Hermione is right in thinking she is not done speaking yet. "I'm just so tired of being scared. All. The time."

Hermione waits to respond until she is sure there is no one passing by the door, and stands. "If we weren't scared, we wouldn't be human. People can die all the time -- that's not just war, it's life."

"This is different."

"I know." Hermione finds the knob in the dark, and looks in Lavender's direction. "Are you coming?"

"Would you hate me if I didn't?"

"No."

There's a pause, rustling and thump, and then Lavender brushing against her side. "Let's go."

Day: 1257; Hour: 8

The noises behind her are her friends and not her enemies; she must keep reminding herself of this, because the sounds scare her. She can't remember a time in her life she had ever been so scared...not just this moment, but the entire time period of war. This era, this decade, this century of built up blood, dust, and rust on top of her bones that keeps her slower than she should be and feeling heavier than the stone wall rising up and out above her. This is worse than the monsters in the dark corners of her room (which was just her accidental magic) when she was a child, because she *is* the monster now. The monster in the left, looking at the one in the right, wondering if it sees her too.

She had thought she knew bravery too, and she had in a way, but not like this - not like now. She hadn't really known what it was like to be brave then, to be holding your breath under mud and waiting instead of fighting. To be afraid of bravery, and so afraid of herself because of it. The ultimate fear was fear of herself, of her wand, of her inclination to run into danger as if she was marked by it. What was bravery anyway? A word on a monument, on an award, on a gravestone? Perhaps there was a different name for what she held, and maybe it did not have a name. Maybe war did not have a name. Simple little words and letters, upper and lowercase letters that were trite and meant nothing to these moments, because it was too big and too important for something small and stupid like words.

What it was was what it was, and maybe that's what Draco had been trying to tell her all along. That maybe if she stopped naming things, stopped putting meaning to these things, she would stop expecting them to be what she named them, and there would no longer be room for the shock and tangled confusion. These years could not be named, nor the things they contained; they simply were and are and exist, and she did to, in them and through them and with them.

Day: 1260; Hour: 12

"You know...you're not how I thought you would be."

It finally draws his attention away from the women exercising on the infomercial, which she had been trying to do with a multitude of topics since she sat down. She had given up for a good fifteen minutes while she thought, and she isn't sure now if he's paying attention because of the topic or because they switched the women to older ladies now.

"How so?"

"Well, at first I thought you were the same, maybe worse. But even after I realized you were different, you're just… Not what I thought."

"And what did you think?" He glares down at the handful of popcorn she has on her lap, his bowl empty now.

"That you were an asshole, of course."

"That's changed?"

"Well…no." He snorts at her answer, and she waves her hand while she swallows her food. "You're still different though."

"I don't hold the same beliefs anymore, Granger. That's all that has changed. I'm still the same person."

"Not to me."

"Then how am I so different?"

"I find you…strangely forgivable." His eyes drop from hers to stare blankly at her leg, and then he turns his head back toward the television when he can't find anything to reply with. "Not… I mean… Sometimes I forget who you were, because of who you are now. I remember in some ways but it's like… It's like I can't be angry anymore. Even when I try to be."

"I've done nothing to warrant forgiveness, Granger." His voice is monotone.

"Yes," she nods, "you have. Or else this…we…"

"You *shouldn't* forgive me." He looks uncomfortable, shifting in his seat. "Like I said, my beliefs have changed, but I'm still the same person. I'm still screwed up, and cruel, and…and everything that you shouldn't be around."

She glares at him. "I can be around whoever I want, and I can forgive you if I please, Malfoy. Save me the self-loathing. I make my own decisions."

"You really are a daft person. You always need to find the good in everyone, even if it's not there, or it's outweighed by--"

She whacks him in the arm, drawing his eyes toward her, and she almost does it again for good measure. "I don't find the good in everyone. I find some in you. Deal with it."

"I--"

"And don't call me daft again."

"You're impossible."

"So are you."

Day: 1262; Hour: 22

She can see The Mark before the woman gets lost under an Auror, or else she would have sworn the lady was a perfectly normal witch. There is something scary in that recognition.

"Deserter," Englewood nods his chin at the scene in front of them.

Hermione shakes her head, turning her head toward Englewood but keeping her eyes on the screaming woman yanked to her feet. "Wouldn't she have known she would have gotten killed by her side or arrested by us?"

Englewood glares at her because he's one of the top notch Aurors, they all roll their eyes and talk shit about. "Cowards are deserters. That's why we've caught four from Voldemort's circle in the past two months."

Circle. Like it was all of six people they had spent these years fighting. What? Did it circle the damn globe? She opens her mouth to ask about how many they might have lost from their own side but thinks better of it. No one ever spoke about the people who left them - she wasn't sure if it was their way of not giving the idea out to people, to make it look like they were winning, or just some strand of honor to not call out their own people. Any way it went she knew she wouldn't get an answer, so she kept her mouth shut and tried to stop thinking if there was more than just death to all the people she had seen vanish the past three years.

Day: 1267; Hour: 13

Hermione's hands are covered in colors, her fingertips smudged with the rainbow as she tries to pretend she has a drop of artistic ability. Dean smiles at her across the table with part encouragement and mostly humor.

"It's abstract."

"Ah." He grins and nods, and returns to his own painting.

"This is a museum piece, you just watch."

"I bet it will be." He laughs, and she gives him a look, her smile killing any heat behind it.

She hums and draws an imperfect circle with one of the pastels that is a sun, or a Frisbee, or a ball… She *did* say it is abstract. Dean smudges shadowing on the portrait of a man, who Hermione recognizes as his father, and there is something very beautiful in the concentration of heart he puts into every stroke of his finger.

"Isn't it odd, how this feels normal sometimes?"

She looks up at his face, and he glances up at her before looking back down again. "How what feels normal?"

"This. Like this is how we are supposed to be living. Like this is just life after school. I thought maybe because we've been living this way for so long… But at times, when nothing else is going on and we're just sitting here, like now, it's as if it's how it's always been."

"The little breaks, you mean?"

"Yeah. When we have no orders, or everything in our faces, it's just… I think we need it though. That break, the reprieve. Just to…remember how to breathe."

She thinks of several things in the gap of seconds; painting, planting, games, conversation, *Malfoy*. "It's a good thing."

"It is."

Later, she finds no tape, and uses gum that Katie Bell left in one of the bedrooms. She sticks her abstract adjacent to the door in the stark white house, and stares contemplatively at the color until her feet hurt.

Day: 1279; Hour: 23

"I wouldn't have taken you for the type to leave in a rush after sex."

Hermione stares down at her shirt in surprise, her hands temporarily halting from turning it right-side out. He sounds uncaring and accepting of the fact, but curious all the same, and she certainly hadn't been expecting the statement.

"I don't really have a type," she whispers back, folding the shirt between her fingers.

His is smirking, she knows. "The indefinable Granger."

She blushes, though she doesn't know why, and looks down at her own nudity. She raises her shirt to cover herself, working to turn it in or out, as long as it's wearable, and leans her head to the right to look for her pants. Though she doesn't want to leave yet, she doubts sudden conversation means he wants her to any less -- just as it always has been.

"Does it bother you? That I surprise you all the time, I mean." Because she does not want him to think she cares if it bothers him that she leaves after sex -- despite that she already knows it doesn't.

There's a smile in his voice when he replies. "It depends on my mood."

She huffs a breath of laughter, but it stops when she feels a brush of skin against her back. His knuckles graze and follow the curve of her spine, and then it is his fingertips that dance softly across her bottom.

"Are you done with me tonight?"

She blinks at the wall, at the cold December colors outside the window, and suddenly feels as detached as winter is from the warmth of humans. She has never heard it put in such a way. As if she was simply using him, and disposing of him whenever she is through. She did in a way -- in the sort of way that sex *is* about using one another -- but she never actually *wants* to be done with him, and there is a different there.

She did not use him as some sex toy, or...or...or whatever sort of thing she could use him for that would make her feel this strange coldness freezing up her intestines. If he breathes too harshly, she fears they might splinter and shatter, like the icicles from the windowsill.

"I'm just saying because... Well, I may not be sixteen anymore, Granger, but I'm not old enough to be done in one shot either..." He trails off, leaving it open and hanging in the air between them. His invitation. His now known acceptance of her

staying beside him in his bed.

She breathes, three, four times, concentrating solely on the way the air fills her up and then deflates her. She thinks of asking him if he wants her to stay, even though it's obvious now that he does, but only because she wants him to somehow *get* that this has never been her choice. That she always assumed her position to be the one that isn't welcomed to stick around.

Instead, she says nothing, and looks back over shoulder at him. It is a strange angle, and she can only make out his chin and chest, but his breathing is even and his pose only slightly stiff. He has put himself out there now in a way that she never would have dared, and even if she had somewhere else to be, she wouldn't leave now.

His fingers ghost back up, raising goosebumps in a wave from the small of her back to the nape of her neck. Her nipples pebble in attention to him, and her heart hammers that static, jumbled beat that has always been just his. Her movements feel weird and tangled, as they aren't used to the motion of turning back around toward him, and she blushes because she knows he's watching. She has to turn, and pause and shift and slide, and turn some more, and it is not graceful at all. He makes no comment on it though, because it is only *normal*, and she is beginning to learn that that is fine around him.

His fingers find her hair, and a knot in turn, and she winces with the pull against her scalp. He pauses, removes his fingers, and where other men may have not noticed or had given up, he surges forward and tries again. His palm is then warm and comfortable against her head, and he uses it to lead her jumbled body toward him, and her mouth to an angle easily accessible to his own.

His lips are hot, dry, and taste like her own, but it is so easily satisfying to feel them at all. He pulls her, rolls her, positions her into comfort, and to where she is laid out before him. He smirks wickedly down at her, as if this is the best plan he's had yet, hovering over her on his elbows. The heat is already building inside of her again, curling in her stomach like the slow turns of a fan against the soft tissue.

He takes his time with her body, plotting plans and routes, and discovering new land. He maps and divides and explores, and by the time dawn shines blue on their lazy limbs and tangled sheets, he has conquered every inch of her.

Day: 1285; Hour: 10

"I wonder what insects do for fun."

"Bother the crap out of us, maybe." Hermione grunts and tries to swat another moth flying at her hair.

"Probably. There are the sly ones…like mosquitoes. They're like…the Slytherin of insects."

"I take offense to that," their blond counterpart speaks up, finally raising his head from his notebook.

"No, well…yes." Neville laughs before continuing. "I mean, they come and bite, and then leave, and are satisfied knowing that they will effectively bother you for days even if they aren't there to see it."

"Then I suppose the kamikaze moths are Gryffindors. Fly at you with no real plan, and hope they dodge your counter attack. And usually end up…" Draco trails off, eyeing the twitching moth on the kitchen floor with meaning.

"There's more thrill, at least." Hermione tries.

"But little satisfaction."

"Maybe the best way to do things is to just put your heart out there and go for it. Aren't *you* the one who told me life can't be planned and structured all the time?"

"A mosquito puts themselves out there when they bite you. They just know when to get out in time."

"Not always."

"But usually."

Hermione shakes her head in the same fashion she does every time she is arguing and has nothing to come back with; but he recognizes it for such, so she doesn't escape his triumphant smirk.

Day: 1290; Hour: 20

Hermione looks up from the fallen tree she is working herself over, her face surprised. "What?"

"I said, Portkey out."

"*Why*?"

"You're a liability."

"Wh-- I... There was no way I could have known that tree was dry rotted, and was going to fall over!"

"Your stupid mistakes just got the Death Eaters onto our location, not to mention that you're snapping twigs with every step, and your eyesight is poor in the dark. You're no use to us; we have enough team members. Portkey out."

"But--"

"*Now*," the Auror demands, his face shining with sweat and red with aggravation.

Hermione opens her mouth, shaking her head, and feels the rise of embarrassment as she notices all the eyes on her. "How can I not snap twigs--"

"Granger--"

"We're in the *woods*, and--"

"I. Said. Now. Don't make this worse for you when I report back to Headquarters, and tell them you also can't seem to follow orders."

"*Fine*!" she hisses, angry now, and practically rips the Portkey from her pocket.

Day: 1290; Hour: 23

Draco willingly shares his popcorn with her that night, and she thinks she should brood more often.

Day: 1293; Hour: 8

She has to look three times; precursory, the second a *was that...no, not possible*, and the third her own excited shrieking inside her head. He keeps the same goofy grin on his face the entire time.

She imagines it looks more like she is attacking him, though she concedes that she *is*, in a way. He laughs when she smothers herself in him, squeezing him so tightly that he has to pull back for air.

"Ron! When did you get here?"

"Yesterday. I have to leave in--"

"Shh, no, don't tell me." She shakes her head, and he smiles again, pulling her back into a hug.

Day: 1294; Hour: 7

The wind is harsh against her skin, and it burns where her hands have chaffed with the chill and dryness of winter. The snow is high and has toppled into her boots, soaking her socks and freezing her skin. She ducks her head against the elements, thinking Spring, thinking *anything* to keep her mind off how cold it is.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, the soles of her shoes leaving prints, and her feet leaving holes in the meter high snow.

She doesn't want to think about Ron, or his face when he looks at her like she doesn't get it. She doesn't want to think about breakfast, and the warmth inside, or how her friends seem so capable of making her feel sick to her stomach and shy around them now. Like she doesn't know them. Like they are constantly picking apart the things she says and does for errors, because her word is no longer good enough.

It hurts. Leaves this spot in her chest open and full of air that's pressing too hard against everything. He thinks she does not understand, because she is not there with him. But Hermione has fought her battles too, and even if they weren't beside Harry and him, it doesn't mean that she knows this war any less. It leaves her with an ache, because it has always been the three of them, but now it is not. Now she is divided from them, and she feels even more lost with this knowledge because she now knows that she is not the only one to think or feel it.

She isn't *naive*. She is *hopeful*. There is a *difference*. And Hermione Granger would never lower herself far enough down into that melodramatic self-pity pool as to think that being hopeful was being naive. She absolutely refused. War could change her if it liked, but it would not bring her to her knees.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, louder now, a pattern offbeat from hers. She doesn't have to look over her shoulder to know he was there. She doesn't have to wait for his scent on the air, or his voice to know who it is. She can tell just by the feel of him. The way the hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end, and the way her bones seem to inflate.

He keeps his distance at first. Just somewhere behind her, following her on her path to nowhere through the snow and general emptiness around them. She tries to make it more complicated. Takes the hills instead of the flatland, winds instead of keeping straight, trudges on through dense woods instead of the normal barren landscape. She thinks he might fall back and drop off. Turn for home and give up on the whole thing.

Instead, he pulls up beside her. He sniffs occasionally, but he doesn't say a word to her. Not a single thing to let her know what it was he thinks he is doing. When she is agitated enough by it, she looks at him. His nose is red, his cheekbones and his ears smudged with color. His shoulders are hunched in an effort to keep the warmth closer to him inside his jacket, and his hands are dug deep into his trouser pockets. His head is bent, staring at the ground they're covering, but when he feels her eyes for long enough, he looks up at her. Crystal grey against gloomy skies and a world of white, his black coat such a contrast that it feels strange to look at him. She blinks because it kind of hurts her eyes. He lifts a brow, sniffs, and turns back forward again.

His arm brushes hers with every step now, and she realizes one of them has moved closer while they weren't paying attention to their steps. He doesn't seem to mind, or even notice, and she isn't sure she minds either. She speeds up her pace, but he pulls up and follows her still, matching her step for step until she feels she can walk no longer.

Fifteen

Day: 1296; Hour: 20

Hermione's eyes are drooping in exhaustion as she struggles to stay awake. She has had too many thoughts that she needed to sort through last night to be able to sleep. Ron had just left yesterday afternoon, and though she knows it is not a time to hold grudges over stupid things, she can't help but keep thinking about the things he said. She is still hurt, and still angry, but she can be those things after the war, and not now -- this is the whole reason she came back after her walk to talk to Ron and ignore the fact that anything was even said.

She needs to get it all off her chest though, for the sake of sleeping. Hermione knows that he will not want to hear it, but she knows he will listen anyway, because he always does.

"I feel like I haven't done my part in the war. I participate, but not like I did in the beginning. I've been feeling like I haven't done as much as I should be. That I should be with Harry and Ron, as I've always been."

She doesn't think he will answer at first, his head still down and reading, and his expression the same as before she started talking. He surprises her though, sighing, and opening his mouth to give in.

"Just because you haven't been with them, doesn't mean you haven't participated. You should know that just by remembering what's happened to you." He scratches his forehead. "Your intelligence really is overrated."

"I know I've participated, but I don't know if it's been *enough*."

"Granger, you do realize that they were on a Horcrux search team? That they have maybe had a handful of duels with Death Eaters since they left? That the whole reason Potter was pulled out was to keep him *safe*, and so he couldn't have been in that many dangerous situations? If you look at it for the facts, I'm sure you can deduce that you've likely done more than them in this war."

"Finding the Horcruxes is more important than battles. If we don't find them, we could lose every battle we fight for all that it's worth."

"The battles are just as important, if not more so. If we don't bring them down,

and if we don't have our victories, Potter will be out of luck anyway. And who is to say that what you've done isn't enough? No one gets to say that. You're here. That's enough."

"I just… I feel so far from them now. I've always been right with them. Now Ron acts as if I can't relate because I haven't been."

"Then he's obviously the one that can't relate," he drawls. "Maybe, Granger, it's time for you to stop judging your worth by how much other people need you."

She pauses, looking up at him as he continues reading the paper as if he hasn't come upon a revelation about her life and who she is, that no one else seems to have grasped. Perhaps he's just known it all along -- like it is common knowledge when it comes to who she is.

She *does* need people to need her, and to count on her for things. This is the way she finds acceptance in the world. She depends on other people's dependence -- for her skills, her smarts, her friendship. She has always judged her productivity and her importance by this.

"But that's the world. Our connections with people. That's the measure of our lives. Of who we are and what we leave behind."

"But connection is based on need? A person can walk out of your life forever tomorrow, and that doesn't mean you haven't changed or connected to that person any less. You'll always be a part of their life; they'll always remember you. Just because they don't need you to get yourself killed for them, doesn't mean they won't remember how much they cared or care for you."

"But they need you in the first place in order to build that connection."

"No. They *want* you around, and that's how a connection begins. Potter and Weasley, or any of your other mates, aren't going to stop wanting you around just because they don't need you anymore."

She shrugs, rubbing her face. "I guess."

"Speaking of need, however," he raises his mug, thrusting it toward the coffee pot and then at her, "coffee?"

"Get it yourself, lazy git." She is trying to build up the energy to walk to bed, let alone to find it within herself to get him coffee.

"Granger," he sounds exasperated, "we're building a *connection* here. I even sat here politely, and *responded* to your melodrama. Which is far more taxing than getting me a cup of coffee. Do you really want to ruin it?"

He smirks, cup still extended toward her and his eyebrows raised. He looks smug, as if he has gotten her to do it, but she knows he won't.

"By not getting you a cup of coffee?"

"Yes."

"Then, yes." He glowers now, and she smirks. "Nice try though, using my words against me like that."

"Of course. I *was* a Slytherin, after all."

"Still *are*, devious prat."

"Insufferable wench." She shakes her head, standing from the table and leaving for her room. "Hey, coffee?"

"You would have better luck getting a house-elf."

Day: 1303; Hour: 5

There is a rumor going around about her sleeping with Ron during his visit. She had never thought seeking privacy for conversation in a bedroom with him would have amounted to so much gossip. Though she and Ron have always been a rumored item, and spending the *entire* night behind a closed door is definitely fuel for the fodder.

It isn't until she hears about the rumor herself that she wonders if it's the reason behind Malfoy ignoring her for the past three days.

Day: 1306; Hour: 14

"I think the duel is coming up soon," Mandy Brocklehurst tells her and Lavender over the cup of her butterbeer.

"Why?" Lavender leans in, and Hermione can practically see her ears twitching with excitement of new things to tell other people.

"Ron. There was just something about him while he was here."

"What?" Hermione asks this time.

"It kept feeling like… like he was here to say goodbye."

Day: 1308; Hour: 17

She confronts Malfoy when she finally gets him alone, and there is a lot of yelling on her part, and a lot of walking away by him. When she finally has him riled up enough about it, she is still somehow unprepared for the way in which he takes it out on her, though she can't say she's unhappy about it.

I haven't been with Ron, you dolt. I haven't even kissed him in years! And this seems to be all he had to know, because he was on her then.

He takes her against the wall, his palm braced beside her head, and his hips snapping as he sinks into her again, and again. She tries to tell him that something like this always happens when he ignores her, and so he should just stop. He seems to make out enough of what she means to say through her constant moaning and panting, because he tells her that if *this* is what happens when he ignores her, he really sees no reason to stop.

Day: 1312; Hour: 15

Hermione has dinner at the Burrow with most the Weasleys' present, and a handful of friends. Lupin looks strained, but relaxes when Tonks finally shows up, breaking a vase five seconds after she walks in. Fred tries to make biscuits, failing miserably with the trash bin full of burnt bread -- he does emerge with four survivors, though no one eats them out of trepidation. Bill and Charlie pick on him relentlessly, and Hermione finds it funny watching Fred being teased by his older brothers, when it is usually Fred and George doing it to Ron and Ginny. McGonagall is more relaxed than Hermione has ever seen her, and the house is warm, and the food pleasant.

She sleeps beside Ginny in her bed that night, and confesses everything. Ginny understands, it seems, albeit in a distant way that comes with being removed from the situation and not knowing much about the Malfoy that Hermione knows. She asks her if it's just a temporary thing, if it's just something that helps for now, and when Hermione cannot find a truthful answer, it scares them both.

Day: 1316; Hour: 9

She spends two and a half days alone with Malfoy, and the lack of television and books is cause for more conversation than he probably likes. He concedes though, likely from her persistence and his own boredom. She learns small things about his childhood that she tries not to think of in a negative light, and she tells him about hers. They talk about everything that seems safe, and then things that they shouldn't if they don't want to anger the other -- so they argue a lot as well.

But it feels productive, once she leaves the house, because she is no longer unsure of topics she should broach, and she no longer minds the silence around him anymore either. That slight awkwardness that was always set into her whenever she was around him is gone now, and his presence is comforting in a complete way that she hasn't ever felt with anyone but her parents and her two best friends. It should scare her a little that she is getting so close to someone who she should be cautionary with her heart around, but she thinks it's too much of a good thing for that.

Day: 1319; Hour: 8

She delivers a package to what looks like a small hut in the middle of the countryside, but is magically enlarged to hold nearly fifty children and a staff of caretakers. She spends a week playing with the kids and doing what she can to help the sick and injured ones. There is a strain of sadness but a pull of hope both, and it is in these days that she comes to the decision on what she wants to do with her life once the war is over.

Madame Pomfrey, an old and comforting face at the orphanage, offers her an internship when she is able, and Hermione readily accepts. It is what she is meant to do, she thinks -- help people.

"Come back when you can."

"I will. Thank you." Hermione grins, hugging the Healer, and leaves with a purpose.

Day: 1333; Hour: 11

"I thought you were dead."

His face pulls down in confusion and something else - which could be anything, considering who he is. "Why?"

She thinks of the piece of paper, like a picture in her mind, and the date and town

scrawled across it. About how she was at Grimmauld yesterday when she found out how badly the mission went, and how McGonagall said that all the survivors were there -- and she had not seen Draco. She also thinks of how he is about privacy, and trust, and how very much he would hate it if he knew she had looked at his personal things. Even if they had been all out in the open.

"I don't know." She shrugs, lowers her head and looks up at him, and it's a horrible lie.

Even if it were a better one, he would probably still see right through it. He looks at her now like she has seen him look at Pansy when even Hermione knew she had been lying. He gives her that look for a good five seconds before he looks away all together. He drops all the questions he could bother asking her about it, but she figures he knows it's pointless. After all, he's alive, isn't he? And that is the point. Is the only thing that matters.

Day: 1333; Hour: 23

He rolls them over, and she sits up in confusion, meeting his eyes as he looks up at her. He licks his lips, reaching to grab her hips and pull her up, pushing her back down. She presses a hand to his chest, moaning, her confusion lost under the pull of sensation. She moves with him, and once he is done showing her the rhythm that he wants, he leaves her hips for her breasts.

She experiments, any embarrassment she would normally feel replaced with just her need and curiosity, and she switches angles and speed until she has found all the ones he likes and that she likes as well. She arches her back, grinding into him and biting her lip.

"Yes, Granger," he breathes. "Yes, just like that."

And she finds that she likes this, being above him. Being the one in the position of power and control. He must see it by the look on her face because he smiles, raising his hips, and she runs her hands up his chest and sinks down onto him again.

Day: 1340; Hour: 10

Hermione slams the frying pan down on the burner, gripping the knob hard to turn it on. She would rip the entire thing off if the fact that all the others were already off didn't make her frustrated all the time.

"Did I do something?" Anthony questions tentatively, and Hermione's laugh is fake

and aggravated.

"What? You? No. *No*. It was this... this arrogant, snarky *asshole*

"Talking about me then, Granger?"

She growls, though later she will think of the adjectives that made him think so, and laugh about it. "Does everyone have a complex today? Think the world revolves around them?"

"So, I take it something is pretty wrong." Anthony hesitates.

"No. No, nothing is *wrong*. Everything is perfectly alright, because I'm going to die soon. That's why everything is fine. I'm in the hands of a professional, you know, so I'm sure I will die in a very professional sort of way!"

She yanks open the refrigerator door, letting it smack against the counter, and Anthony winces before he speaks again. "Is this about a mission?"

"It's about Dooms Day, is what it's about."

"Why don't you rewrite it, like we've been doing?" She spins to face Anthony, his hand gesturing toward Malfoy.

Malfoy usually gets the duty of planning every mission he is on, but lately he has become the unofficial strategist of nearly everyone else's missions as well. It is a little known fact among them that if they want a good strategy, they only need to come to him. He usually does it when asked, as long as he isn't busy and depending on who is asking. Hermione has a feeling it isn't just because he's one of the best out of those who don't mind changing the mission plan, but people ask him more for the reason that if one of them were to get busted for it, they would prefer for it to be him. Anyone who asked him had the honor of owing him a favor, which in the Malfoy universe could turn out to be absolutely anything, but somehow dying was harder than owing Malfoy after Hogwarts.

The notebook he carries with him is down to just a couple dozen pages, because he rips them out when he is done with them. She remembers seeing him in the backyard once, balls of paper lit on fire and flying around in the grass like fairies, and dark grey smoke and ash rising with the wind and staining his clothes and skin.

"Because I *can't*. Because this damn Auror made sure we all left when he did, and told us quite clearly that there would be no other plans made. And I have no way of getting a hold of everyone to let them know what the plan is, even if I did come up with one! So, we're screwed. We're all just… ah!"

Hermione is too angry to stay in one spot, so she storms from the kitchen, leaving Anthony to stare after her and slowly turn the burner off.

Later, when she is less hostile but far from calm, a tremble in her chest from her trepidation, she is startled from her thoughts by a loud sigh and a flash of blond hair. He grunts and curses under his breath, muttering complaints about furniture and the people who created it as he lugs the other couch up to the coffee table. He lets out a pent up breath, slightly flushed, and plops back into the couch.

He eyes her as he reclines back, shifting for a comfortable spot, with all the air of a king. She blinks and looks back down to the book she has been pretending to read for the past hour.

"Do you know what drives a revolution, Granger?"

"Heart."

"I guess that's another way to put it. I would say willingness. The willingness to risk and sacrifice everything in hopes of gaining something you feel you cannot live without. Your life, your rights, your possessions, family -- whatever. The willingness to deal with the repercussions of your revolt that come with both the failure of it and the success of it."

She closes her book and sets it down on the couch beside her, looking across at him, unsure what if this is a speech or a conversation. She doesn't know what to reply with, accept to agree perhaps, but that feels lame on her tongue.

"It takes a lot of strength and a lot of bravery to be willing to deal with the fallout. But to take the risk, means the risk is worth it. Are you willing to deal with the fallout, Granger?"

"What fallout?"

"Your mission."

"I-- What exactly are you getting at?"

"Are you willing to come up with another plan for the possible sake of your lives?"

"I... can't. Even if I was, there's no way to come up with a plan."

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes," he answers slowly. "You can think, can't you?"

"Malfoy, I can't plan this sort of mission. I'm... There's better people for the job. And I can't just come up with something, and expect the rest of the team to go with it. I also have no way of getting in contact with them."

"Yes you do."

"Is that so?"

"You're going to see them before the mission, aren't you? You'll have to discuss it in front of the Auror of course, but there's nothing he can do about it."

"He can *report* me. I've already been suspended once, but if Moody hears about it? He'll put me behind a desk or in hiding for the rest of the war."

"Not willing then." He makes to stand, but this move is calculated, because she can swear she sees him move to sit back down before she even calls for him to wait.

"If it can help people, then I'll do it. But I don't have a plan. I have no idea where to start."

"That's why I'm going to teach you." He pulls a box off the floor and sets it on the table, pulling a chess board out and laying it down.

"Chess?"

"Chess."

He pulls out the pieces, setting them up in their proper places, and Hermione watches his concentrated expression as he thinks about something, and the length of his fingers as he picks the carved marble from the box.

"Alright, Granger. I'm the man who made a different decision at the top of a

tower, and joined Voldemort's ranks to help him commit Muggle and Muggle-born genocide with the rest of the Dark. You are the girl who met the Boy-Who-Lived and never stopped fighting beside him with the Light."

She pauses. "Couldn't you have just said that you're the black and I'm the white? That was a bit dramatic."

He scowls at her. "I need for you to get the point. Every move you make is a move against the Dark, and every move I make puts you in that much danger. Life or death. Understood?"

"Yes. Yes, alright."

He reaches over, knocking her entire back row out and onto the floor around her feet. "That's better."

"Better? You just eliminated half my pieces."

"How many team members do you have?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Fine. But there won't be that many Death Eaters." She nods her chin at his side.

"How do you know there won't be?"

"I... *Fine*. Voldemort won't be there at least, so you can take your king out, too."

"How do you know?" He asks softly, and she looks up in surprise.

"Oh. Well... Well, yes, I suppose he could be."

"He very well can."

"Alright. So whose move?"

"Don't rush things, Granger. Every detail needs to be thought over and sorted out until each move is the most proficient it can be in defeating the other side. How are you going in?"

"I don't know. It's a building, so..."

"How many floors?"

"Three. Four with the basement."

"Right, so let's try it from the first level. There's at least four when you enter." He moves these pieces dangerously close to her own. He sets up the remainder of his pieces with distance according to floor, with Voldemort and two Death Eaters on the back line for the third floor. "The second floor here, as well as the basement, since both are a floor away. Then the third..."

"Why are they all spread out like that? It's not like they are definitely going to be in these positions, so why does it matter? How does this help?"

"Because if you have a plan on how to win with them spread out all over, it's just a bonus to find them all in one spot and take them out then. This is your worst case scenario Granger. Find a way to beat it, and you'll have the master plan. Anything that interrupts what you expect will simply be making it easier."

"Alright."

He looks up at her, adjusting a pawn. "You're nervous. Granger. Why are you already nervous? You're absolutely fucked if you can't pull yourself together before you even cross into enemy territory."

She gives him a withering look. "I can't help it. It's nerve-wracking."

"Why? It's just pieces on a board, isn't it? All you have to do is move your pieces in the best way you can, and then take down the King. That's all."

"It's not just pieces on a board. It's lives."

"No, it's not. They are marble game pieces on a chessboard. Just move them, and win the game. Corner the King, Granger, and win the game."

"Win the game?" She swallows, examining the board.

He puts his finger to the King's crown, wiggling the piece. "Corner the King."

Day: 1342; Hour: 2

She would have liked to drag him in bodily if she could, just like she has seen in the movies. But she is too small and too tired, but the satisfaction is there anyway when the Ministry guards tell her to lower Crabbe Senior to the floor, placing Azkaban issued binds on him.

Pieces on a board, still repeats in her head, as it has all mission to keep her calm. *Corner the King*. And while Voldemort was not there, her plan worked beautifully, and she brought the highest rank of Death Eater there in herself.

Day: 1345; Hour: 12

Moody does not suspend her again as she had feared, because the mission went too smoothly. They had all walked out with only minor scrapes, and most the Death Eaters found were brought in as prisoners. He does not congratulate her, but he does clasp a hand around her shoulder after he chews her out about her decision, and this tells her all she needs to know.

She doesn't see Malfoy to thank him, and her desire to doesn't fade with the power and elation of a win. On the third day after the battle, she gives a woman a small package to give to Malfoy for her, after learning the woman had a meeting with him later.

It is the white King playing piece, the note under it a simple '*Thank you*'. Hermione does not expect anything in reply, but when the woman returns, she hands her a note and smiles.

I could dedicate my life to teaching you, but you will never be more than half a Slytherin. No matter how drunk from victory, Granger, you never give up your bloody King.

She laughs, and tucks it into her pocket, hearing it slide against the parchment of letters from Harry and Ron.

Sixteen

Day: 1350; Hour: 17

You do not ever get used to it. She had thought she might after a year, two, three with no doubt. But her body still shakes like her blood is ice water and she still hesitates half the time when the crowd is mixed and she has to fire off something at oncoming targets. She would do much better if she didn't need to think about it after, because *was I right, was I right?* is now a far more dreadful question than in the short silence of waiting for a teacher to tell her the answer to it. She will always doubt herself here, because she has seen too many people who were *wrong. She* has been wrong.

She is more advanced than she had been though, by leaps and bounds, and there are less times that the two sides meld into a frenzied jumble of confusion and friendly firing. They were like children in the beginning. It's hard not to think that they still are.

Everyone makes mistakes here. Even the highest ranked Aurors have hung their heads on a battlefield. Her hardest enemy, perhaps, was her own determination to be confident in her own excellence. Sometimes people can be nothing more than instinct, shed of all the layers of civility and society, and she struggled too long in accepting her own raw humanity.

She was better now though, and came down to her humility enough to think, at first, that everyone was getting worse, before she realized she was just improving and they were all shit at war.

Two bodies, clad in black, send vestiges of winter spiraling around them. Draco's feet dig for purchase, turning weak snow into sludge, and both their feet kick up the top layer of mud that the ice left for puddles as they fall. Specks of blood scatter, but are lost in the palette their boots make, turning flawless white into dark brown lines and shapes around them. Fred is screaming himself hoarse, and Draco is a silent fighter trading words for breath.

She thinks to stop them, but remembers the abuse Malfoy and herself bestowed upon one another in the beginning and changes her mind. They need this maybe, in a way none of them really understand. Neville yells about fighting the other side too much to fight with each other, sending quick glances to the battle going on just twenty yards up, but he still doesn't stop them either.

There is so much tension here, in war. A weight, a deep pressure against your chest and heart that feels like it might need to be ripped and broken and pushed until it's gone. And, at times, one needs someone else to tear it out for them.

Day: 1354; Hour: 19

She thinks that, perhaps, she is starting to feel more for Draco Malfoy than she ever wanted to allow herself to. Her time is either filled with him being there, or her waiting for him to be. This is dangerous, and reckless, but she keeps heading down this path as if it is the best thing she could do.

She does not like that she thinks about him constantly, or enjoys spending so much time with him even if they are arguing, or that she has grown to care about if he lives, or dies, or gets hurt. She does not want to care about another person right now, no matter who they are, because the risk of losing anyone now is too great. But she realizes that she can't help but to give a damn about him, no matter what she tells herself, or how much she tries to remember and convince herself of why she should not think of him in a positive light at all. Because then she is back to thinking about how he's funny in a dry, sarcastic way, or how he challenges her in a brilliant way, or how much she likes his mouth and the look on his face when he is moving inside of her. She likes that he is broody and caustic, and that she never knows what she is going to get when she is near him. She likes that he is a remote hog, watches corny infomercials, never willingly shares his snacks, and doesn't take any of her crap without giving his own back.

It is now a sad fact of her life that she *likes* Draco Malfoy. Her friends would surely flip if they found out, *he* would probably make a snide comment and laugh in her face, and she doesn't much like it either -- but there it is, and they were all just going to have to deal with it.

Day: 1356; Hour: 17

Sometimes it goes in slow motion, or maybe it is just her thoughts and the fact that she is scared they are not moving fast enough. Billowing black cloaks, the hint of spring in her nostrils as she pulls in deep uneven gasps, the wind that rushes at the treetops and forces the bare branches to bend and claw at the sky.

She deflects and casts, deflects and casts, and the young woman she is dragging across the street is limp in her arm and against her. Witches and wizards and children and squibs, all with no Mark or Phoenix banner, far from the decisions of war, have now found themselves directly in the middle. Some fight, new and unsure, with their wands trained on high hoods and ivory masks, and most run toward a

destination they don't know. Moody is screaming something about forming a group to get the citizens out, barking names over the screams, but Hermione does not pay attention. She fights with an army, but sometimes she feels very much alone. The pulsing of her heart tells her to do what she has to to secure her own survival, but the feeling in it tells her to get this woman, and all of them, to somewhere safe and far away. It is somehow easier to see the dead when they knew the possibility was part of their choice, and she wants no responsibility for marking off those who were never given the option.

Her knees crack when she squats down to get a better grip, launching herself and the woman back into the trench, a red burst of light exploding from her wand. The healer acknowledges her but does not move to come, only gestures for her to bring the woman next to the man, who is next to the man, who is next to the woman, who is next to the boy in line.

When she moves from the trench there is a stream of tangling golden hues that blows into her arm and fills it with the feel of fire. She shoots left-handed and crooked the rest of the fight, but it only means she hits them in the shoulders instead of the heart.

"They're getting bold," Lavender says after.

"When haven't they been?" Hermione murmurs back, her attention fixed on Draco and Moody just two arm lengths away.

She thinks of leaning against him, of inhaling the scent of his shoulder, and imagines his arm wrapped around her back, hand rubbing her hip, or her elbow, or his thumb in the palm of her hand. It is the thought of comfort, of rock formations against tired backs, or hot baths on sore bodies. Instead she gets a nod, a lift of the chin, and his eyes passing over hers as Moody tells her to go to a healer.

Voices fade in and out as she seats herself on a blown out wall, some stranger ripping up her sleeve. She thinks of slow strokes over her hair and lullabies drifting on waves of her mother's voice. The man next to her offers her a cigarette, the healer shines a light in her eyes and looks at her funny, She thinks she needs new shoes.

Day: 1360; Hour: 8

Hermione coughs and sniffs miserably, digging her overheated head further into her pillow. She can hear another cough echoed in the room next to her, and then a sneeze somewhere outside her door. The flu sweeps across the Order without pause,

making missions sloppy and bad attitudes abound.

Day: 1361; Hour: 22

She reaches a decision to call him Draco. Most people, she figures, would just let the process happen if it was going to, but she has always had the need to *decide* things. She even made a list in her head for this. She wasn't sure if he would like it, but his first name slipped out of her at strange (or passionate) times anyway, and he hasn't ever said anything about it.

It also has the benefit of making her feel better about sleeping with him. While she has gotten over the wall of having a lover but not a boyfriend, it makes her feel odd to be sleeping with someone and still calling them by their last name. It is too impersonal, she thinks, so she will call him Draco.

Day: 1370; Hour: 18

"Take off your clothes."

She blinks back at him in surprise, at the rough, demanding tone he uses, as he unclasps his mud and water soaked cloak. She had had a good idea what he wanted when she saw his head of hair, but had second guessed it when she saw just how dirty he was. Streaks of mud in his hair, on his face, covering his hands brown.

She fumbles for a moment, her fingers a little numb and useless before pulling her shirt over her head. He is angry, she knows, but not at her. Obviously someone pissed him off, or something happened to. She invited this sort of tension release on herself, really. It was just four days ago that she attacked him herself after a particularly stressful meeting, her mouth on his and her hands pulling his shirt up before he even shut the door behind him. He hadn't complained a bit at the time, and she certainly wasn't going to complain now.

She's down to her underwear by the time he was naked in front of her, but he quickly remedies the situation by ripping the band at her hip as he pulls her closer. His mouth was hard and angry as he shoves her bra up, his hands skimming along her stomach to cup each breast. He bends his head as she pulls it over her head, and then clutches him before she even discards it when he sucks her nipples through the gaps of his fingers.

He stands upright, smacking his lips as he looks down at her, his jaw muscles working with his aggravation. His hands leave prints of them in mud over her breasts before he raised them to her shoulders. He kissed her again, brief and

claiming, before pushing her down to the bed behind her. She was very unsure of how to deal with this Draco, but she couldn't say that this didn't excite her in an entirely different way. She *wanted* him to take her like this, hard and angry, and she got a thrill from the knowledge that he was going to.

He flips her over onto her stomach, his fingers digging into her hips as he pulls her up to her hands and knees, and she falters.

"I... I don't..." She paused; her breath in her chest as the bed dips under his knees.

He waits for her to continue, and she debates on what to say, blushing madly from the new position and his hand roaming and squeezing freely along her bottom. When she doesn't say anything further, he runs the head of his cock along her, collecting moisture before positioning himself at the entrance she had been hoping he was going for.

She releases her breath, relieved, because this she can do. He gives her a pause a moment longer, making sure she isn't going to continue with her disagreement, and then slowly sinks into her.

The slowness surprises her, but she supposed it was because of her initial hesitation, and this gives her time to change her mind. His hands grip her hips like vices, and then his anger is back as he pounds into her.

Hermione breathes out a gasp and lowers her head to the mattress, curling her fingers into the blanket below. The sounds of groaning and skin smacking against skin quickly rides over the strange creaking of the house, and Hermione presses her open mouth against the bed and shuts her eyes. His blunt nails make dents in her skin, his pelvis batters her bum, and the feeling is incredible. She was never sure if she would like it quite this hard, but *I do, I do, I do* repeated in her head like a blabbering mantra.

Her only dislike of the position now came with not being able to touch him, or kiss him, or see him. She feels slightly disconnected in this way, but he makes up for it with his angle and speed, and the way he's worked up enough to take to muttering strings of words between his panting. He sets a positively furious pace, and she tries to keep up as she pushes back against him, moaning and holding onto the bedspread.

This was why it shocked her through her haze of lust when he slowed down to an infuriating speed, a hand leaving her hip to push around to her stomach and then

down, his fingers finding her nub immediately.

"No," she moaned. "I... I want..."

"What do you want?" His voice was hoarse and deep, and she groaned at the sound of it.

"Draco, just..."

"Saying my first name isn't going to help you, love." His other hand leaves her hip to journey to her breast, and she pushes back against him in response.

She does it again, realizing there's no grip to stop her from doing so, and then again. Pushing back, pulling forward, pushing back. She will blush later when she realizes that he was staying completely still and letting her have at him, but now all she can concentrate on is the feel of him giving her what she wants. Of her *taking* it from him.

"That's it, Granger," he whispers. "Fuck me."

He removes his fingers from her clit, palming one of her cheeks before sliding his hand up along the sweat of her spine to delve into her hair. She looks over her shoulder at him at the slight pull against her scalp, locking eyes with him over the length of her back. She let out a hard breath, and he seemed just as surprised as her by what sensations can be brought with eye contact alone.

"Fuck," he groans, bringing his hands back to her hips to start pounding into her again.

She watches the tightening and releasing of the muscles in his arms and chest as he moves, before turning her head back around, a crick developing in her neck. He doesn't like this, gripping her hair to tug her head again. She looks back at him, keeping her eyes on his this time, and does not recall a single time in her life where she has ever felt so connected to another person before. There is something extremely intimate about this now that she had not felt before for some reason, though she suspects it is because when he's close, he always drops his head away.

He licks his lips and his mouth falls open as his hips grow erratic. She knew he would come now, and she was caught up in him, burning each image to her memory. From the way his eyes roll back, to the tightening of his muscles and the locking of his bones, to his head falling back and his Adam's apple bobbing over the long, hard groan that rips itself from his throat. He is the most beautiful thing she has ever

seen, hair matted, face flushed, and dirt-stained. She counts herself lucky that he is allowing her to see him at his most vulnerable, and it is something she will never forget.

He falls forward, dropping his hands from her to catch himself against the bed, and she turns her head back around to relieve the ache. His breath is hot, rushing quickly against her back, and she bites her lip as he pulls out of her. He bends his head to brush his lips against her skin, and she blushes as he pushes up, thinking of just how exposed to him she is.

She makes to move and turn over, but he grabs her legs, stilling her. "Don't move."

His breath puffs against her backside before his mouth is on her, his thumbs pressing and sliding over her thighs and his hair brushing her bum. It doesn't take long before she is crying out her release, having already been close before he came. She collapses onto the bed under the weak support of her shaking limbs, gasping for air, and reeling in the sensations. It takes her awhile to open her eyes, remembering that he's still in the room while she continues to be a human, quivering blob.

They grow wider in surprise when they land on his assets as he stands at the edge of the bed, and she looks up to his face with a blush. He smirks and gestures down at himself.

"Come now, Granger. I believe you're already well acquainted."

She huffs and looks away from him, uncurling her fingers from the blanket, her knuckles cracking. She tried to find a suitable reply, but her brain is still recuperating. She wonders if this is part of the reason he has sex with her to begin with -- it always seems to be a great way to leave her speechless.

"You're filthy." It will be hours later that she will realize with a start that she didn't even second-guess his meaning behind these words.

"How do you think I got this way?" she asked him, weakly raising a dirty streaked arm, wet with her sweat.

He holds out his hand and she completely ruins her suspicious look by taking it before giving in to him. "Yes, that is my fault, isn't it? I suppose I will have to pay for my rudeness by cleaning you myself."

Day: 1373; Hour: 10

"What are you doing?" Hermione calls through the screen door, and Neville looks up at her innocently.

"What do you mean?"

"You're standing out in the rain."

"If you knew what he was doing already..." A voice starts over her shoulder.

"...Why did you ask?" She turns her head to face the Weasley twins, and is immediately suspicious.

"Why is Neville out in the rain?"

"Ah, why she asks, George."

"Which is what she should have asked in the first place, Fred."

"Maybe she's--"

"Uh oh."

"Hands on hips."

"We've got the 'Angry Hermione' now."

"Impatient, really," Hermione replies. "Now answer my question."

"What was the--"

"*Fred,*" she cuts him off.

"George, actually."

"We have a bet for how long he can stand out there before getting soaked."

"That's... Are you *really* that bored?" Hermione arches an eyebrow, looking back at Neville again.

"Really."

"So what does the winner get?"

"What does the *loser* get is the question." Fred grins, and George holds up a small purple candy.

"What is that?"

"Oh, just something we cooked up."

"Oh, God,"she whispers.

An hour later she sends Neville to the tub with instructions not to touch anything and set it on fire, and has to throw pillows over her head to muffle out the high whistling noises from the steam shooting out his ears.

Day: 1379; Hour: 14

She never understood what a man's infatuation was with a woman not wearing underwear, because it's not like they don't have clothes on over their naked selves anyway. She can't say it bothers her much anymore however, once she has found out just how much she can use it to her advantage. He had startled her to stuttering when he asked her if she was wearing a bra, his eyes seemingly glued to her breasts as he started in a slow, predatory walk across the kitchen. When she had finally managed a 'no', he had wasted no time devouring her.

She really was seeing the perks to this now.

Day: 1380; Hour: 16

"I just feel very lost. Like... Like I don't know where it is I belong in the world anymore. I've always known, in some obscure way, where -- or *who* -- I was with. But now it's like... floating. And I don't know what to think or how to feel anymore."

She tries to ignore the fact that she is crying, and to Draco Malfoy of all people, but the emotions are overpowering and she found herself babbling the words as soon as he stepped up beside her in front of the kitchen sink. She can't explain *why* she is hit by the sudden need to break down, besides that her mind won't stop processing all the things that worry her, and her monthly is approaching rapidly.

She needs Harry, or better, Ron. Ron who is touchy-feely, and gives one of the best hugs possible when he isn't trying. She needs something solid to stabilize her, and something more than just the ground beneath her feet. She needs warmth, and strength, and to just hurry up and pull herself together because it's not the time for this. It never is.

He surprises her when he reaches up to awkwardly wrap his arm around the back of her neck, his body stiff as he nudges her toward him and she tumbles into him. She clenches his shirt, burying her face into his shoulder. And it is not Ron, but it is *him*, and it is perfect in that. It is what she needs.

He waits until her panicked breathing has evened out and her fingers are less severe on his shirt before shrugging the shoulder her forehead is resting on. She lifts her head and he bends his, kissing her slow and chapped, and giving her comfort the only way he knows how.

Day: 1385; Hour: 18

Hermione treks a kilometer through a forest and a valley, angry the entire time because that is what happens when she has PMS. The physical exertion is wicked when coupled with her tiredness and cramps, and she is very close to setting the entire house on fire when the team arrives to find it empty. No people, no house-elf, not a single sheet of parchment. There's only furniture, and a drop of liquor in a cup on the table, and she is getting very tired of her participation in missions that don't go right.

Day: 1390; Hour: 2

She tries to write a letter to Harry and Ron, but sits for almost an hour before admitting that she doesn't know what to say. The rolled up parchment she hands Lupin the next day consists of only three short paragraphs, but at least it is something.

Day: 1396; Hour: 17

She does a turnabout when she hears the squeak of the front door opening. She has pretended that she did not look several times over the past few days to check if it was him, but she has been hopeful every time she looked at who was entering. She figures it is the laws of her world that she cannot go too long without seeing him, because he has always been around.

It is him this time, as she figured it would be. Seamus just returned a few short hours ago, cursing the blond's name under his breath, so she knew they had both been in the area for something. He unclasps his cloak, shrugging it off his shoulders, and pausing in the movement when his eyes land on something. She follows his gaze to her tattered slippers at the bottom of the couch as he resumes taking off his cloak, slower this time as his attention seems to still be concentrated on her slippers. He tosses the thick garment over the back of a chair, and she wonders if

she should start heading back down the hall before he spots her looking at him. He'll know anyway, she figures, because the floor grunts and whines too much under her feet, and he'll hear it.

He spots her a moment later, taking inventory of the room, and bites his lips as they stare at one another. "Hi."

"Hello," she says stupidly, scratching her head and looking blankly at the lamp on the table beside his hip.

"Who else is here?"

"Seamus, Angelina, Ginny, and Tonks. Profess-- McGonagall stopped in earlier to talk to Tonks, but she's gone."

He frowns, rubbing the top of his head in frustration, and she smiles at the mess he makes of it. "I need to ask you for a favor."

"Alright, sure." She shrugs, and pretends she doesn't find it odd and beyond interesting that he is. He doesn't ask anyone for favors, she knows, because he's told her that he hates feeling like he owes anyone anything.

"There's a key in Moody's desk, and it's mine. Moody told me he would return it to me when all this is over, but I need it now. I would ask it from him myself, but he's gone, and I don't know when he'll be back."

"Did you ask Lupin? He has access to Moody's office, for… backup purposes."

"I did. He informed me that I could wait, and when I tried to explain to him that I *couldn't*, he wasn't hearing it."

"So, you want me to break in?"

He gives a breath of laughter, and looks at her in a strange way that she has seen before but never on his face. "For a girl who hates to break the rules, it's your first thought often enough, isn't it?"

She hadn't exactly survived her childhood without this form of survival instinct. "What else do you suggest then?"

"Asking him? I know you know him on a bit more of a personal level. He's fond of you because of his fondness of Potter, and I was curious to see if you would,

perhaps, be willing to use that to your advantage a bit."

She bunches in her cheek, and tilts her head sideways with a shrug, because she doesn't think that will work. "I don't know."

He shuts down on her, like he is prone to do, despite how much it bothers her. "Forget I asked then."

"Calm down. I didn't say *no*, I just said that I don't know if that will work."

"I'll figure something else out."

"Well maybe we could--"

"I meant, *I'll* figure something else out."

She glares at him now, angry that *he* is angry while she is trying to help. "Stop being an ass, Malfoy. I'll help, I just don't know how to go about it yet."

He blows out a breath and palms his forehead, rubbing hard against the wrinkled lines of his frustration. "All you have to do is ask him. Tell him I need it, and that Moody knows it's mine."

"He'll want proof. What is the key to?"

That blank look again, the calculation in his eyes, the rigid posturing. Sometimes she thinks she can never win with him, and most of the time she thinks it is a character fault that she keeps trying to anyway. "That's none of your business."

"Unless it's to a room with all your deep, dark secrets, Malfoy, I fail to see how it matters if you tell me."

"It matters, because you don't *need* to know, and you're just digging for your fucking answers and to appease your irritating need to be nosy."

"*Actually*," she bites, "I'm trying to think of a way to do what you asked me to--"

"And *again*, never. Mind."

"What is the big deal?" She throws up her arms, exasperated.

"Why do you need to know so badly?"

"So if Lupin asks, I can--"

"Lupin knows that the key is mine. He might even know what it's to. So it doesn't matter if you know or not."

"And you couldn't have just explained that in the first place?"

"Like it would have stopped your curiosity."

"It would have, until you made such a big deal of it, so now I can't *help* but wonder what it is you're hiding!"

"All my Muggle-born torture devices, Granger. Want in? What the fuck does it have to do with anything?"

"I--"

"Forget I asked."

"No. I--"

"I said never mind."

And this is obviously the end of the discussion, because he turns and walks out the front door before she can get out another word. She glares evilly at the door, and then at his cloak before marching back to the kitchen.

Day: 1396; Hour: 1

Her door opens with a long, low creak, and her eyelids fly up with the sound of it. She glues her eyes to the door, her surprise melting into curiosity at the figure she can just make out in the dark.

"Draco?" Though this probably isn't the best thing to say, as it can be anyone, and anyone would wonder why she's asking if it's Malfoy coming into her room at two in the morning.

The figure doesn't respond, the door clicking behind him, and her heart starts to beat harder in fear. She can feel her adrenaline rush up the sides of her neck until her eyes are wider with it, because she *thinks* it is him, but her overactive imagination has always been her downfall.

She sits up and grabs her wand off the table, aiming it in the general direction of the door and reaches a fumbling hand for the switch on the lamp. The bed sinks beside her knees and next to her hip just as the lamp floods the room with weak light. She has to blink rapidly to adjust her eyes, but she can make out blond, and knows anyway.

"You can't just creep up on people like that," she hisses, and he grabs the tip of her wand to lower it and slide it out of her hand and back onto the table.

He moves a leg, turning slightly to throw it over to the other side of hers, and the hand at her hip slides up along the bed as he leans forward. She is forced to lie back down when he presses against her, and he's glaring at her before kissing her angrily. She replies tentatively at first, but remembers her frustration over his entrance and his attitude earlier that night, and kisses him back just as angry. This seems to be what he wants; nipping her lip as she digs her nails into his shoulders, and she hears him muttering something about wenches (or witches), and she knows it will be a long night.

Day: 1399; Hour: 7

Hermione awakes to the sounds of screaming and stifled laughter, an explosion that causes her bed to rumble, and the sound of water as loud as a giant fountain right below her. It takes her a moment to smile, think, groan, and swell with fear and anticipation as she remembers it's the Official Weasley Twin Holiday: April 1st.

Seventeen

Day: 1400; Hour: 8

Lavender shakes her head and grimaces as the girl holds up a bottle of bright purple nail polish. Hermione can't, for anything, remember the girl's name, though she knows she was in the year below them. Ginny would probably know it, but she hasn't seen Ginny in months, so that doesn't help. She doesn't think Lavender knows her name either; by the way she keeps calling her 'dear'.

Unless her name *is* Dear. A nickname, perhaps -- Deridra, Sandeara, or maybe...

She leaves her mindless thoughts hanging as she realizes Lavender has moved on from her chitchat about robes and gardens, and has taken up something far more interesting. "Not like I can know for sure, but..."

"What about Moody again?"

Lavender clicks her tongue, and sends her a look to let her know she is not pleased she didn't have Hermione's full attention. "I said that I know something is happening. Something really big. Like... the final battle."

Possibly-Dear nods her head, and then frowns when Lavender shakes her own at yet another color.

"Why do you think so?"

"Moody has his office locked down. And Hermione, I mean *locked down*. The Sneakoscopes go off whenever anyone even *thinks* of entering his office. He has another room as well, that no one is allowed to go in without him, and the only people who have entered it is Ministry *officials*, and Aurors I've never seen. His office and that room are warded up so tight, that when Seamus tried to follow Moody inside his office, he was thrown all the way back into the wall."

"He's preparing something then."

"Exactly. Something absolutely top secret. And then I saw Ron and Harry at Grimmauld two days ago, and they went *straight* for that room, and stayed there until the moment they left. This is *it*, Hermione. I mean, really *it*."

Lavender continues twittering on; her voice thick in nerves, but Hermione doesn't hear her. She is too busy thinking of the implications, and what is coming at all of them.

Day: 1403; Hour: 18

His shoulder is soft and warm against her cheek, her nose pressed against his chest as she breathes him in. This has taken some getting used to, touching him after sex in a way that's almost cuddling but not quite. It still feels strange, as if he will push her away at any second, but he never has since he first asked her to stay the night, and she tries to relax. It took them awhile to get to this point, even after she began to stay. They used to lie on opposite sides, not touching, until they learned that just collapsing on top of one another and falling asleep was easier for tired bones.

She likes the change; because there is so much more fulfillment that comes with lying beside him after sex, rather than planning her escape. It makes this whole thing feel so much more normal, and she enjoys the warmth of his skin and lull of comfort.

"Draco?" she whispers.

"Hmm?" he hums, drowsy from their recent activities.

There is a knot in her stomach, because she doesn't want to ask nearly as much as she feels she has to. It has been something that has bothered her from the very beginning, and she is sick of telling herself the answer when she doesn't really know it. She is unsure of what his reaction will be, but she'll ride it out just as she does all of his bad moods. She *has* to know, and she doesn't know how he will respond or what she will do, but she needs for him to tell her.

"Do you sleep with anyone else?"

His breathing pauses for just a second, and she moves with his movements as he lifts the arm not around her ribs and shifts. "Lola."

She had been holding her breath, but now she shutters it in, dread dropping like a cold weight into her stomach, before erupting with hot jealousy. "Lola?"

"Yes. Slim, tall, brunette. I sleep with her every night."

She stares hard at his navel, unable to stop the images of him with someone else.

Before she can process just how she feels and what she should respond with, she realizes there's something popping in and out of the top of her vision. She pulls her head back to look up, watching him seesaw his wand between his fingers.

"Your... wand?" She's confused.

"Lola." He sounds amused, and she looks up at his chin before looking back down at the wand, flushing in embarrassment.

"That's... That's Lola?" She needs the confirmation, but she's already feeling relieved.

He makes a sound that can be a laugh or anything at all. "Indeed."

"So why didn't you just say it was your wand?"

"If I'm honest, I wanted to see your reaction." She blushes again, ducking her head down to his chest.

"Then why didn't you just tell me the name of someone you really sleep with?"

"I do sleep with my wand."

"You're dodging the question," she tells him astutely, and he shoves his wand back under his pillow before relaxing again.

"That's because I don't have sex with anyone but you."

She would like to ask him something lame, like 'really', just to be sure he's honest. But it is Draco, and she knows that if he were sleeping with anyone else, he would have no reason to lie about it. If he didn't want to say, he just wouldn't answer at all.

"Oh."

She thinks he might ask her why she wants to know, but he probably knows it's for the same reason he asked her in the beginning. Which he could go ahead and think, because she isn't about tell him it's because she has begun to care for him, and the thought of him sleeping with anyone else makes her sick and want to beg Moody to transfer her to some obscure Third World country. In secret, so he can't visit. In a locked room, so she can't get out. Or more likely, makes her want to *plot* some sort of corruption of this other woman, which makes her think his traits are

transferable through his sweat on her skin.

She looks at him now in a slightly different light, knowing for sure that she is the only one to have him now. And it might not be in the classical sense of a boyfriend, and fully, but at least it is like this. She runs her hand from his ribs and down and across his chest, in a touch that may be possessive if she knew what a possessive touch was.

He shifts under it, turning his head toward her and breathing out against the top of her head. "Give me a half hour, Granger."

"For what?"

"*Sleep*, nymph. I'm bloody exhausted."

"Oh." She blushes, wondering if he meant to call her a *nymph* or a nymph*omaniac* . But either one would be cause for the blush. "Sorry, I..."

She hadn't *meant* for the touch to come across that way, as she was pretty sleepy herself, but she rather he thought that, than her explaining it wasn't about that. "Don't apologize. Just... half an hour. Then you can touch me wherever you want. Or you can *now*, but I'm too knackered to do much about it."

For all his talk about exhaustion, she still falls asleep before him, and it is he who wakes her up an hour later. She finds them both on their sides, facing one another and tangled together, his mouth warm and soft on her neck. He turns her around, her back to his chest, and pulls her leg over his before showing her the benefits of lazy, groggy, wakeup sex.

After several more reasons to be exhausted again, and almost as many naps, she pulls her jeans on and places the key from her pocket onto his chest. He stops his content, half-hooded watching of her getting dressed and examines it for a moment, turning it over in his palm.

"Thank you." He looks at her seriously, and she grins so wide he laughs at her.

Day: 1409; Hour: 6

"Are you scared, Neville?"

"Do you remember, back at Hogwarts, when I used to hyperventilate and shake really bad whenever I had detention with Snape, or after I would blow something up

in his classroom? And I would have to squeeze something and breathe into a bag?"

"Yes." She nods.

Neville raises his hand above the table, opening it to reveal a faded yellow ball in his palm that she hasn't seen in years. "I have the bag in my pocket. And at night, I shake so hard I think I might break my bones."

Day: 1411; Hour: 14

Charlie Weasley shakes his head, glancing at his father's worried and worn face in the dining room doorway.

"I'm just ready for this to be over. It's all been a buildup to this duel, and I just want to see what we're going to have to do after. I'm tired of wondering."

Bill shrugs, cocking his head and sitting back into the armchair. "You say that now, but once we get to the aftermath, you might be wishing we were back to before it happened."

"I'm not *that* pessimistic."

"Harry will win," Hermione says softly, and when they look up at her, she repeats it more strongly. "Harry will win."

Day: 1415; Hour: 15

She takes her anxiety out on Draco, but she thinks he knows what is coming when she starts arguing with him over the superiority of soda to pumpkin juice -- despite that she *agrees* with him. It quickly escalates to attacks on his character, which he returns, and she gets so caught up in her anger as they scream at one another in the middle of the living room, that she forgets why she even started this anyway. But it is a liberation from her nerves and fears about what's coming in her life, and though it is freeing and good at first, she begins to regret starting it the deeper they try to hurt one another.

She makes a single comment about inbreeding when he has had enough, growling and throwing up his hands. He turns from her, but changes his mind on walking away, and goes after her instead. It is just two minutes later, when he's biting into her shoulder, with her nails leaving angry tracks down his neck as her back smacks against the front door, that she forgets the regret this at all.

She now knows just *why* it is that people go on about angry makeup sex like it could possibly be a good thing, because it is, it is, it *is*, and she has found yet another reason to argue with him.

Day: 1417; Hour: 3

They are huddled against the tree. The girl is shaking so badly her hands smack herself in the stomach. The other girl is heaving into the snow, and the boy carries his face strong but his eyes are darting too rapidly for him to be anywhere near calm. Another boy stands off to the left, dull and lifeless except for his fast breathing while his friend shakes him by the shoulders and yells something Hermione can't hear.

Some call them fresh blood, others name them newbies, and still others just idiots. She couldn't ever really agree with Draco when he spoke about stupidity and bravery as lovers when she thought of her own actions, but she sees it now in them. She looks at them and wonders why they were so stupid as to have joined the war, yet smiles at their bravery for doing the same thing.

When she was younger bravery was one of the most esteemed traits a person could have. With enough reflection she has realized she thought this because it is what she is regarded as having, and what so many wish they had. Hermione, however, now can't help but wish less people did. Especially newly minted adults who are really just children still with legal ages.

She sees herself reflected back like a mirror that warped her looks. She sees it in the bad aim, the fight against the impulse to run, the shaking, the wild panic that tosses rational thought to the smoke and screams in the air; it is a reflection of herself in the beginning. She also sees it in the raw, uncontrollable, deep and burning fear that twists their faces, because that is all of them always.

She falls suddenly, face first and stiff as a board. She hears a curse yelled behind her, feels a trembling hand on her shoulder before a scream and a crack of ice as one of the new Auror recruits takes off to defend or hide. The snow freezes her skin numb, and she waits and waits for the kid to come back, so cold it is a harsh pain.

It isn't a fresh apologetic face that greets her when she's shoved over though, but Lavender's face all blotched and wet makeup. Her hands shake too as she revives her, and she falls to her butt on the ground with her hand over her heart, choking on sobs and words about death. Hermione has just enough time to sit up before Lavender leans forward and vomits up water, and Hermione thinks maybe there really wasn't much separation learned in the last four years after all.

Day: 1419; Hour: 20

"Are you nervous at all?"

"About what?" He glances away from the program, and snatches back his bag of crackers once he sees that she has them.

"The final battle. It's coming, you know."

"I know. And it's not the final battle. The war will continue on after that. It's just the climax."

"But it's the deciding battle."

"Not necessarily. Whichever side loses it will suffer an extreme loss, yes, but there's still a chance either side will win after that."

Hermione wiggles in her seat, her hands fidgeting with the strings on her pajamas. She is nervous. No, she is absolutely *terrified*, is what she is. She has had the need to talk to someone about it, but it is only him that she thinks she can. Everyone else either gets twitchy, or paranoid, or has the possibility of falling into seizures. Draco is always calm, even when he's not. He can handle the idea of war, because he has accepted it. People die, he knows. It may be anyone, and it may be him, and he approaches this with a sort of quiet understanding that makes her think he is less human than he looks.

"There's a prophecy--" she starts, not sure if she is allowed to tell him, but not feeling like she shouldn't.

"I know," he answers anyway. "It says that one of them must kill the other, but everyone dies sometime, and someone might kill the survivor after their duel anyway. There is no reason to stop if Potter dies."

She breathes in too hard, and gives her anxiety away. They have been building toward this moment since they were ten years old, and though they have all known it was coming, Hermione does not feel that the last decade has prepared her in the least. Will he walk away, she wonders, and if he doesn't, where is her place in the world if not beside him? Can the Order carry it? Can they stop Voldemort? Harry Potter may only be one man, but *everything* rests on him, and that includes their hope. It has always been Harry who would end it. What if he couldn't?

"What if Harry doesn't win?"

"We hide, we rebuild. We fight again."

"What if we lose?"

"Then we'll probably be dead anyway."

"That's reassuring."

"Don't come to me for reassuring, Granger. I'm not going to lie to you just to make you feel better. This is war. Suck it up."

She glares at him and then at the television screen, yanking the crackers out of his grasp. "I don't believe you that you're not nervous."

"I didn't say I was or wasn't. I said that Harry Potter isn't the end all of this war. It's the same battle we've fought since the beginning, except that Voldemort is definitely going to be there, and Potter has come out of hiding. All we have to do is win."

"All…" she snorts, and he grabs his crackers back again, shoving the box at her. "That's the only kind I like!"

"They're all the same, twit."

"Oh," she answers dumbly, pulling out another package. "Well the other kind has all different sorts in the box."

He chews slowly and stares at her, and she glares back.

Day: 1422; Hour: 4

She waits restlessly for news. For an owl, or someone to come get her to tell her it's time to fight or time to learn the plan. No one comes.

Everyone is silent in thought, in fear, in anticipation. The knowledge of what is coming is something tangible in the air, and people speak in mutters and half-thoughts, because they are all too busy with waiting.

The missions and battles seem to have come to a standstill, and the pressure is mounting, waiting to break over them all.

Day: 1428; Hour: 11

She opens her eyes to warmth, drowsy and comfortable, despite her growing nerves over where she is. She has spent the night in Draco's bed it seems, and while this is not a new thing, it is the first time she has stayed so late. Normally, if they sleep, it is only for half an hour or so, before they wake to do it all over again. When either of them knows they are too knackered not to pass out for hours, one of them will end up leaving. This time she remembers falling asleep while it was still dark out, but now it is bright and late into the morning.

Draco had not seemed to want to let her go, and twice she tried to remove herself from the bed in exhaustion, and twice he pulled her back. She hadn't thought much of it at the time (his lips and hands had taken care of the thought process), but now she wonders if this is some sort of strange stage in a sexual relationship -- where they are comfortable enough with one another to sleep beside each other without having to wake up twenty minutes later for another go of things as an excuse for laying together.

His chest is warm and smooth beneath her cheek, and she can feel the distant, steady beat of his heart near her ear. She thinks he must be sleeping, the beats are slow and strong. But also because his arm is under her, his hand in a fist at the small of her back, and he would have moved it by now if he was awake. It wasn't that long ago when she had woken with a rude yank when he pulled his arm out from under her and muttered his disgruntlement over possible limb loss.

She moves to look up at him, because she has grown a fascination for watching him unguarded in his sleep, ever since she took him injured to her room all that time ago. She starts when she finds him awake, his eyes connected to the ceiling.

"What were you dreaming about?" His voice is clear from sleep, and she knows he has been up thinking for a while now.

She blinks, looking down from his turned-up eyes and to the point of his chin. "I don't know. Was I?"

He lifts a shoulder, and she moves with his body motion. "I was trying to figure out if you had an attitude in a dream, of if you always make those little annoyed sounds in your sleep."

"Annoyed sounds?"

"Your tongue," he whispers. "You suck it off the roof of your mouth."

"Oh. I don't know." She doesn't know her sleeping habits, because she has never

slept beside someone like this before. She used silencing charms on her bed because of Parvati's snoring, and though there were a few sleepovers in the Muggle world, no one had said anything to her.

She lowers her head, her cheek brushing over his nipple, and it pebbles and hardens under her skin. She blushes when she realizes she has a hand dangerously low on his pubic bone, and slides it up to his stomach. It collapses under her touch, and she can hear him inhale deeply above her.

"How was the lake?"

"What?" She is too infatuated with the goosebumps that she has caused on his skin to hear what he has said.

"The lake behind this house, that I told you about. Did you go?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I went."

"Do you remember where it is?"

"Yes."

"Good. I lost my ring there, and I couldn't remember how to find the place yesterday. If I get back you'll have to tell me how to get there."

She pauses, her eyes directed at the scar on his side but not seeing anything, before raising her head. He looks down at her with the motion, his face set in curious lines. He scans her face, looking for the reason, but comes up empty. "What? Did you find my ring? Pawn it, and use the money to fund the fight for house-elf rights?"

"If. You said 'if'."

Something flashes in his eyes, though it is so quick she cannot tell what it is or if it was just the light playing tricks on her. "Yes, if. I haven't been to this house in months, and I don't know if I'll be getting back here before the end of the war."

And for the first time in her life, Hermione can see the lie all over Draco Malfoy's face. She lowers her head back to his chest, realizing that this must be why he kept her in bed so long. He is going somewhere that he thinks is dangerous enough it warrants 'ifs' and an entire night of shagging because he doesn't think he'll be doing it again. He doesn't think he is coming back, and this makes her heart swell and

pump hard against the walls of its confines, until she feels nauseous. Fear and anxiety bloat the inside of her throat, and she finds she can't breathe properly.

She wonders if she should tell him that she knows, or ask him where he's going, but he will be angry if she does, and she doesn't want to ruin the comfortable air they are laying in. Instead, she closes her eyes, savoring the feel of him for one more stolen moment before deciding to get up. She does not want to outstay her welcome, and there is a self-conscious part of her that isn't sure if he wants her to leave.

This side of her is quieted when he uncurls his fingers and presses them against her back to stay her movements, and she looks up at him in surprise. He stares down at her for a moment before pushing himself up on his elbow and taking her mouth, slow but determined. Her hand moves from his stomach to his chest as she kisses him back, her eyes squeezed tightly at the thought of where he is soon to be leaving to. He breathes out against her lips at her touch along his torso, and wraps his arm fully around her, pulling her against his chest as he rolls them over.

"Wait, wait," she is muffled against his lips, applying pressure from her palm to his shoulder.

He pulls up and looks at her, his brow furrowed and his mouth tempting. "What's wrong?"

"I...have to go the bathroom." She blushes.

"Oh. Then go." He moves off of her and onto his side beside her, but halts her when she begins to pull the sheet with her. "Do you really need that?"

"Yes." She raises an eyebrow and yanks on it again.

"You're going to leave me cold, just to protect your modesty -- which isn't anything I haven't gotten to know in several different ways, need I remind you."

She flushes at the flirtatious leer, and pulls again. "Stop looking for a peep show, Malfoy."

He laughs. "Stop being so bloody self-conscious."

"I'm not self-conscious." She raises her chin, pulling the sheet with her once he's let it go, and peeking over her shoulder by the doorway to find him still watching her.

When she returns, she hesitates too long on the best way to crawl back into the bed, and he rises to pull her in and against him. He raises a brow at the mint taste of her mouth, but doesn't say anything, lowering her down to pry the sheet away from her.

He is slow, his touches are caresses and his mouth like fire, as if he has all the time in the world. She isn't sure if it's because he knows just how incredibly sore she is, if he is sore himself, or just because he knows she likes it like this sometimes. He doesn't speak, sewing kisses across her skin, keeping his eyes trained to her expression, and she watches him back, taking him in. It is a gradual buildup to shattering, and he does this with perfection in his passion, the burn so slow she feels like she is losing her mind.

When they are both a sweating, panting mess of skin and limbs, he rolls them over, pulling her tight against him. He cradles her head, her mouth to the rapid pounding of his heartbeat, and she clutches him like it is the last time she ever will.

Day: 1430; Hour: 8

"'Ello, Hermione."

She points a Twizzler she had grabbed from the candy bowl at Fred's face, then lets it fall to the floor like poison at his grin. "Shoe ah 'e shpitting thith ow?"

"What?" he laughs, cocking his head.

Hermione narrows her eyes at him, strips of red squished between her teeth but not being swallowed. The question is just how long Fred has been in the house, and just where the candy had come from.

"Don't worry, I tested it myself. Of course, that was *before* I knew he was here, so..." The voice behind her trailed away when she whirled toward it so fast she had to grab the lamp to keep from spinning off her feet.

A piece of the candy fell out of her mouth rather unattractively and she slaps her hand over her mouth and shrieks behind it. "Jesus, Hermione, that was worse than Ron at breakfast."

"Hey!"

She knocks Harry clear off his feet and his breath explodes into the mass of hair that has fallen into his face. He has trouble regaining it with the way she's

squeezing him like one of his loony fangirls, but instead of calling over security he only takes away her own breath with his hug. She stumbles to her feet and flings herself at Ron next, a man smart enough to brace himself against the couch. Distantly she registers in her mind that she is calling them both things like jerk, oaf, prat, ass, and though she doesn't know why she is too overwhelmed to care.

"What the hell am I? A Malfoy?" Fred huffs, "I get an evil glare and suspicion, and they get--"

"Ahh! Ooh! You jerk, I love you, you ass! Oooh, aaah, what strong arms you have!" George skips around Fred in a circle, fanning himself with a magazine.

"Oh, your shiny emerald eyes, Harry! Oh, your big, heaving chest Ron!" Fred squeals, grabbing George's arms and throwing himself backward.

"I could just shite myself with *glee* to have you near me!" George paused, realizing the three pairs of eyes on him at the other side of the room, and Fred falls in a second later.

"You know, mum always said you two were just desperate for attention."

"You two play girls pretty well though," Harry jabs.

"And I do *not* sound like that."

Eighteen

Day: 1431; Hour: 6

"How have you been doing? Really." Harry says this in a tone that reminds her he knows her too well for lies.

It is late, perhaps too late, and Ron had retired to the bedroom not ten minutes ago. He had complained loudly about the lack of curtains to block the early morning sun as well as the lack of a lock on the bedroom door. It made Hermione wonder just what sort of places the two were used to living in, and if there had been any bitter sort of resentment creeping up her throat it was torn away by the reminder of how well the night had gone. It was all nostalgia followed by stories of what they had missed since they saw one another last, and they all were very good at pretending that it didn't bother them not to have been there in the first place.

Hermione had felt an explosion of warmth inside her gut when she first heard Harry's voice behind her, and it had only grown and spread like fire inside her since. She had gotten so used to trying to forget, she hadn't really known the true measure of how much she missed them until she could once again see Ron's blushing face and Harry's sheepish grin. Suddenly she missed them all at once, beyond any need she had had before until it was a suffering ache, and it was at the moment they were standing in front of her. She could now touch them, and see them, hear them, smell them; a sensory explosion of their friendship, and she felt like she wanted to cry, laugh, scream and spin in circles while jumping until they sat her down and gave her a proper head exam.

"How is anyone doing?" She shrugs, knowing it is best to avoid this conversation because it only leads to very bad land.

Like the, *why did you leave me*, or maybe, more importantly, *how*, because she doesn't think she could have ever been the one to walk away first. She almost wants to ask those dark, icky questions that will not do for this time in their lives - what *am I* to you, and why is Ron the one, and what more could I do to be the better friend, and why wasn't *I* the one that was good enough? Why wasn't it *me* you wanted there with you? She wanted to know if this place between them filled with memories of the past would ever be filled up with something more, or if those memories would fade with the passing of different directions and all one would see is that dark, deep, unrelenting chasm she sometimes peers into while alone and feels inside her gut. She wants to tell him that sometimes it feels like she doesn't count, and she wants to

be cruel and tell him it's because of him, and Ron a little too because Harry was the choice he made, and not her. She wants to admit she feels selfish, and she doesn't know if that's so wrong anymore.

And she also wants to grab him and shake him and demand for him to take her with him. Because she has heard the gossip, because she feels the shadows creep closer to her bed at night, because she knows what is coming and despite their presence she also knows they are not here to take her back with them. Even though it was always supposed to be the three of them, and she, unlike him or whoever makes up his mind for him now, has not decided on another way. He'll say something like, *you're still fighting the war*, and she'll say, *but not with you, not really*. Then he would say something like, *Hermione, please,* or *that doesn't matter*. And she would like to tell him that it *does* matter, it matters very much, because in all her thoughts and dreams and fear and circumstances of imagination and possible outcomes since she first met him until now, Hermione Granger has always lived or died standing next to Harry Potter and Ron Weasley.

She wants to ask him if he left her because he has other intelligent people to do her work for her, and why she was so replaceable; if someone else stands on his left while he has kept Ron so tight on his right; if it was always supposed to be him and Ron, and why it was; if she should just accept these things, and how.

"That's not what I asked," he says softly, flinching when he sips from his tea because he put too much sugar in it.

Hermione breathes two, three times, and gets hold of her mind. It is too easy to be hurt here, and much harder to be strong - she has never been willing to accept what is easy. Harry has enough without her adding to it. After war, that is when you are supposed to lick your wounds, and there would be years for that. Not now. They are still here, now, aren't they? And for her. That should say enough. And she loves them, and there would be no changing that. They were all doing what was best for the cause, or *something*, and if people's feelings got hurt it was trivial. Or supposed to be. Perhaps for those who don't have to feel them.

"I'm doing fine." And maybe her voice is too thick.

"Hermione," he says this like a whispered plea and it jerks her eyes up to his before she allows them to.

He looks very tired now, dragged down and out, and suddenly and all at once he is not the boy she used to know. In her mind, when she thinks of him, she sees the face she knew and saw every day four years ago. Before the war was a 'war', before

he left; and she searches for the reminder of these things on his face whenever she sees him again because they make her hold tighter to the past, to what grounds her. But time has gone, and war has raged, and somewhere Harry Potter turned into a man when she wasn't looking. She feels older now too, her skin more used, and her hand meets his across the table and squeezes too hard when he wraps his fingers around hers.

When the hell did they grow up? When did Harry ever earn the right to look at her like he lived long enough to learn the secret of the world and it was too bad to tell her? When had his hands become so big, his face so sharp and shadowed since the morning shave, his features pulled into an understanding grief instead of teenage angst? And why did this realization feel like she was swallowing a golf ball? Oh, she is crying. How absurd.

He knocks the chair over when he stands and tugs on her as he sidesteps the table, pulling her to her feet and into him. He smells like the woods and breakfast and fire smoke, and she is swallowed up inside his arms.

"You know, I didn't want either one of you…" he whispers into her hair, and the fact that he says this of all things makes her think he knows or that it has bothered him to leave her behind. "Ron wouldn't have stayed… done something stupid… know how he is."

"It's okay."

"Is it?"

She's not sure. "Yes."

He pauses, his face burrowing deeper into her hair, and she sways a little against him, both of them squeezing so hard they can hardly breathe but neither seem to care. "Will it be?"

"Yes, it will be. I promise. Yes, yes, yes." She nods her face against his shoulder and wipes her tears off on his shirt, feeling stupid and something else.

"I'm sorry," they both say this at the same time, and they laugh oddly because it's not funny but it sort of is.

"Just promise me, swear to *God*, you'll come back."

He doesn't say anything. She pushes herself tighter to him, having expected as

much.

Day: 1431; Hour: 16

Ron gives her a kick in the bum and when she turns to give him a sappy smile he puts his hands up and takes a slow step back. Rolling her eyes, Hermione whacks him in the arm. The git put on a show, but he would probably puff his chest all up if she started crying.

"Watch out, mate," Ron whispers to Harry, slowly stepping around her, "danger, danger. She could blow at any mom-- oh, shit. Hands on hips."

"What was that? Don't ever tickle a sleeping dragon?" Ron snickered at Harry's comment just like he did all through Hogwarts, because he is a pervert and always will be.

She pulls them both into a hug, refusing to let her mind go from this moment to the first one they are gone. For a moment, four arms wrapped around her, Ron swaying them, Harry huffing mint candy into their faces, it is just the three of them and nothing has felt so right.

"Be careful," she tells them.

"You too."

"Be damn careful."

"I love you two."

"Love you."

"Honestly," Ron huffs, then stops, suddenly serious like he just remembered. "Love you too. We'll see you soon."

"Of course." They all pretend her smile isn't watery, and that the boys don't stare at her like they suddenly want to lock her away in their trunks until the end of the war. "If you need me..."

"We know."

And then they are gone before it can get harder than it already is. Hope has still emerged to tint her thoughts though, and every second that ticks away she is

waiting for them to come back to either get her, or stay.

Day: 1434; Hour: 11

"Do you notice it?"

She shakes her head and shrugs once Seamus finally speaks, standing still at the stove. "What?"

"This house…this house was packed two days ago. Today, there's three of us. Justin just got back from the house in Glasgow, and told me he had been alone. Alone. Where is everyone?"

Hermione's eyes widen, falling to the table. She moves her spoon in the tasteless soup, and then pushes the bowl away. "They haven't left for…that yet."

"How do you know?"

Because I'm not there. "I just know."

He shakes his head, lets out a caustic laugh, and leaves the room.

Day: 1436; Hour: 1

When does war end?

For some, it is directly before or directly after Hermione is woken in the middle of the night, Justin's hands shaking as he pulls on her shoulder. The words fall in broken, stuttered vowels of excitement and nervousness, his eyes wide and his voice clogged. They are the ones who believe it is over once The-Boy-Who-Lived is The-One-Who-Conquered, and finally fulfills his revenge, destroying the Horcruxes and killing Voldemort.

For others, they rejoice at the achievement, while Hermione throws her clock into the wall, wondering why she *was not there* to take her spot as she has always been meant to do. For others, they think of the dead and injured instead, as Hermione does when she sits trembling on her bed, and wondering about her friends. For them, it is not over until they have counted their losses, and until the Death Eaters are no longer there to count theirs at all.

Justin enters the room again to see her crying, but he knows they are not tears of sadness, nor joy, but of relief. It is close to being done now, she knows. It is so close

to being over. And Harry has lived, Justin told her.

Harry is alive.

Day: 1436; Hour: 3

She arrives at St. Mungo's with a fire burning inside of her that causes her whole body to shake. The outside of the building was swamped with press and security was tighter than she had ever seen it. They let her up to the third floor almost reluctantly, but there is nothing in the world that could stop her from getting there and she was sure they knew this.

"The healers are in all of their rooms right now. No one is allowed to have visitors."

"I need to see them to know how they are!" she yells, her frustration palpable. "I'm not leaving until you let me in to those rooms!"

"No offense, Miss," a guard lowers his voice, leaning toward her, "but not a single healer has the patience to deal with you, and you need to let them do their jobs before there are more casualties."

Hermione looks as if she might wrap her hands around the thickness of his neck and feel him choke against the palm of her hands. "Then give me a list."

"There are no lists." He stands upright, raising his eyes to above her head, *blowing her off*.

"Bullshit! Give me the fucking list!" Hermione's voice cracks and there is an ugly swaying in her knees that makes her thing she is going to blackout.

She takes a huff of an inhale, the prelude to crying, when he ignores her save a twitching at his temple. Her hands clench and unclench, but there is no getting herself under control as she stalks off to the waiting room.

Day: 1436; Hour: 12

Hermione spent the night annoying the hospital staff and drifting in and out of a light sleep when the emotional exhaustion proved heavy. It was nine hours after she arrived that she woke up with a gasp and Lupin standing over her.

She goes to hug him but he puts up a bandaged hand, wincing already at the

thought. Justin is standing to her left, mumbling another apology under his breath. Lupin looks paler than normal, oddly frail, and this frightens her.

"I'm fine, I'll be out of here by tonight if I have my way."

"You should get as much rest as you can --" Seamus tries, but is cut off with a sharp look from Lupin.

"There is too much work that needs to be done, and I'll… Moody is dead."

Several sharp breaths combine into one loud sound in the waiting room for two different reasons. One, Moody, their seemingly invincible leader, was dead -- though, this is war, and Superman does not ever exist here. They stopped being naive enough to think so a long time ago. Two, they were about to get The List, and every hope they had hung on to not just over the night but over these years was about the be validated or dashed away forever.

"Who else?" Lavender asks when it doesn't seem Lupin is willing to carry on, or anyone else is daring to ask.

"I'm not sure. All I know is by first hand accounts, and the few I've seen or have heard are here. We've lost Lee Jordan, Mandy Brocklehurst, Terry Boot, Sharon Livora, Hannah Abbott, Don Keets," he pauses, finds Hermione's eyes, they breathe, "Neville Longbottom."

There is a sob that rips itself from her throat before she is even aware it is there. "What?"

The word does not even sound like a word at all, just a gurgle of saliva and grief, and suddenly she can not breathe. Someone's hand is on her shoulder and it connects her back to the ground, and settles her into the reality.

Lupin looks down for a moment, compartmentalizing, tucking it all back into that dirty, ugly section of their souls they reserve for the savageness of war. But Hermione can't, and does not, because all she can feel is a pain shooting up along her bones, and she is shaking with it.

She shoves her fist inside her mouth, her teeth clenching to the skin at her knuckles, and her whole body is throwing itself violently to the sobs that are quiet, and deep, and *hurt*. Her mind goes through a thousand moments that his face had once stood before her eyes, and they play like a flipbook of memories that she holds to her heart as if nursing a wound. *Oh, Neville, Oh, Neville, Oh, Neville*, and she

does not believe it, because this is not real.

"We're still finding out more, and will be for a few days I suspect, but you all need to get back to Headquarters." Lupin was back to business, because he had to be, because no one else would be.

"Why?" Justin is crying too, she realizes, but she can't look at him.

"Garret Ust and Ron Weasley are missing."

She is lucky for the row of chairs right behind her, or she would have collapsed to the ground instead. "Missing?"

"We believe they were taken. We want to organize everyone who is in decent health." Lupin sent quick glances around them. "I will be checking myself out of hospital at six tonight. I expect you to all be at Headquarters, and to have sent out an alert for all the wires to be there by seven."

"Yes, sir."

Hermione does not realize they have left until Lupin draws her attention up from the floor and she can see they are the only two in the waiting room. "We're going to find them. They are still alive -- Ron is too important to not use for something, you know that."

"Yes," her response sounds weak, even to her.

"Harry isn't allowed visitors yet, but he'll be fine… I stole a look at his chart."

"What…" Hermione paused, cleared her throat, dropped the pretense. "What of Malfoy?"

There was a look that passed over Lupin's face, and though she couldn't care to know what it meant, it was soft. "Three-oh-six."

"What?"

"Room 306, Hermione."

Day: 1436; Hour: 13

It takes her a long time after Lupin has left before she can pull herself up from

her seat. She must have been there crying for nearly an hour until she mentally kicked herself in the head. Neville had always just seemed... innocent, still, after everything. She had never thought he wouldn't make it to the end of all of this. But it wasn't the time to think about it, or mourn him, or close up and shut down. Ron still had to be found, this war still had to end for good.

All she could do now was store her losses in rows along her heart and wait for the end of everything to put them all where they belong. She could not think of them, she could only pretend that they never happened, not yet. Neville was just... Neville was in some safe house somewhere, sleeping away the morning, that was all, right? That was all, that was it, that's fine, he was finehewasgoingtobeokayyesbecausebecause. He was Neville. He was probably sleeping in, or taking a shower, or playing some game. But for her, there was work she had to do, and she knew that the last thing Neville, or any of the ones lost, would want for her to do is sit there and cry over them when what they had died for wasn't over yet. She wasn't going to make that sacrifice for nothing. She refused.

And she had to be strong for Ron. She had to find him, and she would. She would tear the world apart if that is what it meant. She could only hope that he was holding on, that he was doing okay, that he was strong -- but she knew he was strong. As long as he kept his head about him, she knew he would be alright. And Lupin had been right, the Death Eaters weren't going to do anything just yet, not when they were short a leader and had Ron to gain something back. They knew what Ron meant to Harry (because Harry was the only one that mattered to the Dark, the rest of them have always been insignificant, and maybe to the Order too). He would alright, but they had to come up with a plan quick, and they had to all be in the right mind. *She* had to be in the right mind to help him, and damn it, she would be for him.

So she walked with a straight spine, hollow stomach, high chin, and blotchy face to room 306. She peeks her head around the door, finding him awake and looking at her as if he knew she was coming. Her heart hammers and wails against her chest, sparks of adrenaline taking off down the bones of her shoulders and arms. At least he is alive, and okay, and *alive*, and here. Hermione stands and stares at him, and maybe he knows she needs to because he doesn't come up with something snappy or anything at all. He just stares back, his eyes flicking across her appearance, and perhaps knowing why she looks a wreck.

She scratches her head and enters, feeling stupid though she doesn't know why. The knot is back in her chest again and she doesn't know the reason for that either, but suddenly she wishes Draco was the man she could go over and hug, and breakdown on, and to mumble every one of her sorrows and worries against the skin

of his neck.

"Hey."

"Hi," he replies.

"You're a jerk," she sniffs, because she is bitter about not being told of the final battle, and she is a little angry with him for not telling her himself, and she needs to say something before she loses it.

"Well. I'm lying in hospital, and you can still find it within that black little heart of yours to insult me, I see. Where's the sympathy, Granger? The tears, and the wailing, and all that rot?"

"In your imagination, I'm sure." She smiles faintly at her own comeback, and he gives her a sharp look.

She takes a moment to look over him, content that his mind seems to be in working order. His fingers are wrapped, likely broken, and a large bruise is swelling up the right side of his jaw. There's a smudge of black above the middle of his lip, and fading blue along the lines of his nose. There are three patches on his chest and stomach, two of them just beginning to spot red with blood, and his upper right arm is wrapped in gauze. His shoulder is bare, but covered with potions, gleaming a tinted blue.

"I've lost a toe."

"Liar."

He glares at her. "Why would I lie about losing a toe?"

"How the hell did you lose a *toe*, Draco?"

"Severing curse. Luckily enough it only hit me in my toe, or I might be laying here without a leg. I was running at the time."

"Jesus," she whispers, automatically looking down to where the sheet lays over the bump of his feet.

"I thought you would be off visiting Potter?" he says after a long pause.

She meets his eyes, now knowing that he knows about Ron, and possibly Neville

as well. Which would be good, because she thinks he deserves to know, but does not think she can say it.

"They won't let me in the room yet," she answers, and looks back down at his feet.

"Ah."

She rushes her next words out, because she says them on a thought, thinking he deserves to hear them, but knowing it is probably not wise to say them. "I would come visit you anyway."

He looks at her from the ceiling. "Yes, I suppose you would take the time out to enjoy my suffering."

She doesn't know if he really thinks this is why, or if he is just trying to change the flow of the conversation before it hits uncomfortable foreign territory. She charges on anyway, recklessly, "I'm glad you're alive, Draco. That you're not hurt too badly."

He looks at her for a moment more, her heart jumping as she waits for his response, and then looks back at the ceiling. "Who else would you have to argue with?"

She takes this second out he provides, knowing he is as uncomfortable as she is now. Knowing that they do not have the room today for emotions they don't know what to do with or how to deal with, because there is already too much here in this hospital they don't want to face.

"Exactly. And the missing toe provides ammunition for the next month at least."

He swings his eyes back to her, smirking. "Does the rest of the world know how evil you are, or am I the only one privileged enough to be on the receiving end?"

"You get my special attention, I'd say." He leers at her and she blushes, realizing the double meaning. "Not like *that*."

"Either way, really." He shrugs, and the start of a grin freezes on his face as he shuts his eyes and exhales hard through his teeth.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Is it your shoulder?"

"I said *nothing,*" he repeats, opening his eyes to glare at her, slowly relaxing back into the bed.

"If you're in pain, why don't you have any potions?"

"Because I'm not in pain?"

"Let me go get a healer."

"Granger, *no*. Don't even fucking think about it."

"Why? Draco, you're in--"

"Because I don't *like* them. They mess with my head, and I can't comprehend shit or see what's going on."

"You don't need to see. The war is over."

"No, it's not."

"I'm getting the healer," she tells him, turning back for the door again.

"No, I'm not taking another-- Granger. *Granger*!"

He glares drowsily up at her not three minutes later, and she reaches up to brush his fringe away from his eyes. "You needed it."

"I'm going to shove pain potions down your throat when I get out of here, so you know what this is like."

"If I'm in pain, I'll be glad to take it. You're so unbelievably stubborn and thickheaded."

"Can't believe you did that."

"Go to sleep."

"I'm not going to sleep, you cruel little wench." But he closes his eyes when she

runs her fingertips over them, and keeps them closed as she brushes circles and lines over the rest of his face.

He opens them to slits a few quiet moments later, the gray hazy and tired. His arm reaches up slowly, his knuckles brushing down her cheek, the pad of his thumb just edging the corner of her mouth. It is a tender touch she didn't expect, and though it is not arms wrapped around her or whispers of how it's going to be okay, it is from Draco and it is enough. Somehow, it is exactly what she needs.

It doesn't take long for his breathing to even out, and his lips to part in sleep. She watches him for a very long time before finally pulling herself away, placing the heavy green ring, the Malfoy crest, that she had found at the lake the day he left, down on his bedside table.

Nineteen

Day: 1436; Hour: 15

"I don't think you understand. Or, at least, I'm hoping you don't understand, because I would hate to see someone *that* stupid in such a position of--"

"Hermione," Justin whispered, but she jerked her arm away from his touch and shoves another finger into the Auror's chest.

"You are out of line--" Auror *whoever* begins, but Hermione cuts him off with a fake laugh and another raw poke into his sternum.

"And you are *insane* if you think I'm going to leave you alone for a *second* before you do something about this!"

The man grabs her arm suddenly, his fingers digging so hard into her wrist she feels the bones might pop. "We still have people we're pulling out of the fucking *mud* , hospital rooms filled with injuries, and a full morgue. We have a--"

"You think I don't know that? Huh? I *know that*! My *friends* have died today, and throughout this entire *fucking* war! People I considered my *family* are in that morgue, so don't you *dare* preach to me about what we have *lost*!" Hermione screams this in a way that breaks her voice open, splinters the expression on her face, and she hates that she is crying.

"Sir," Justin tries, and Hermione lets him leave his hand on her shoulder now. "First, I suggest you drop her hand before we take this up with Lupin. Second, all we're asking from you is for you to organize all in good health to form a search team. Both of us are already volunteering for it."

The Auror clenched his fist after releasing her, face pulled into disgust. "All decisions on missions are handed down the chain of command. If you want a search team, go get in the line bending the hallways at Mungo's to talk to Lupin."

"Ron Weasley is a good man. He has sacrificed--" Hermione starts, her hands shaking.

"They are all good people. They have all sacrificed. There is a long list of people that are missing. Unless he's got the ability to come back and save us all, he's

waiting to be saved with the rest of us."

Because he was not Harry Potter, and she was angry at the darkness in the way she thought it, but all she could feel was callousness.

Day: 1437; Hour: 7

The healer tells her that Lupin has demanded Harry doesn't know about Ron yet. Ron is the exception, the woman tells her, and he knows about the status of the others they have documented so far. *Documented*, and Hermione wonders if the healers have lost their emotions from the war that was so huge it also had the energy to rip through hospital corridors with all the ferocity of a lion.

Ron is at his home, healing, and should be in good health within two weeks. That is their story. That is what makes Hermione want to scream, and vomit, and stay perfectly still all at the same time.

Harry is in much better shape than she had expected. His left arm was in a sling, small scratches lining the right side of his face from temple to jaw, and four broken fingers. There was the tint of a healing balm peeking out from the collar of his hospital gown, and a soft orange glow across his ribs came from under the thin fabric. For some reason, she had thought of some horrible disfigured face and body with claw-locked hands, and then she realized that she had lived too long with her worst fears. Magic would have him healed in a day, perhaps two. It was the mental damage she was most scared of now.

He took her hand and didn't let it go for an hour, both sitting in silence save their breath and the noise outside the room. He stared at the ceiling and then at her, in her eyes, and for a good fifteen minutes she was afraid to blink. It was like she was scared that he might not find what he needed there if she did.

"I love you." This is the first thing he says, and the tears jet to her eyeballs from the weight in her chest.

She nods for several seconds until she feels that her vocal chords might work, if she tries really hard. "I love you too, Harry. I love you so much."

He apologizes for her not being able to come earlier, but he had forgotten to inform them to let her in until that afternoon. He tells her that he doesn't want to talk about anything that has happened yet, and she irrationally feels the words of her anger bubble up inside her. She wants to know why he didn't make sure to get her before the battle, when he has always gotten her in the past, and why she was

not good enough for this to him. But it is not the time, and she knows it will not be for a long time now, when there is room for her bitterness over the grief of loss that they all share now.

He does ask her who she has visited and how they are, and when she raises her chin in defiance to anything he has to say when she tells him she has visited Draco Malfoy as well, his answer is not one she is expecting. She tells him that he is fine, and looks worriedly at the sudden faraway expression on his face before he lapses into silence once again.

Before she leaves, he speaks up when her hand is on the knob. "Hermione?"

"Yeah?"

"If you see Malfoy again…tell him I'm sorry."

"For what?" She shakes her head in confusion, and he shakes his own in refusal to answer.

"Just tell him."

"Alright."

Day: 1437; Hour: 10

"I know, Hermione. Our organization is non-existent, everything has been blown to ruins. We're not even sure about all the casualties or how many are going to pull out of their injuries, let alone where everyone *is*."

"We still need to find Ron! The others that are missing too, yes, and organize funerals, and comb the area for other casualties, and *everything, I know*. But Ron is out there, waiting for us! I know what it was like to be that person, and I am *sure* that I did not have it as bad as him!"

"I care about Ron too, Hermione. I know the things we have to do. We're trying to reassemble as quickly as we can, and as soon as we do, I plan on creating a rescue mission for Ron and all the others. He is important to us, but everyone else who is missing is important to other people as well--"

"I know that! You're not listening to me! We have enough people, especially now that we--"

"Hermione! We are gathering able people and our resources to form several search teams for everyone that is missing, but we *don't* have enough people that are able, not performing another duty, and that we know the location of to form a team at this very second! We--"

"Then figure out where they are, Lupin! Ron could be *dying*, and you, and *you*..."

Hermione trails off, because there is a sudden, stark look that overwhelms Lupin's face. Exasperation is there, but there is also something else, more deep and personal that she doesn't know except for the feel of it. Because he is the one in charge, who is supposed to be the best at this and to get done what needed to be done. But he couldn't. He couldn't because no one was good enough in war.

"Tell me what to do. I can't sit here. I can't sit here, Lupin, please don't make me." She whispers this, and if she sounds broken, it is nothing he doesn't feel.

"Organize them. Locate the Order members and Auror's who are in a decent health and haven't been assigned anything else. Compile the names and bring them to me."

Day: 1437; Hour 14

Harry is sleeping, so she visits everyone else she has yet to see that day or at all.

Anthony, Tonks, Angelina, and Ernie MacMillan. They are all more positive than she had expected, and if Ron wasn't missing and Neville wasn't lost, she might have also felt that blister of hope. But she could hardly be relieved, not yet. McGonagall had already left, along with George and Molly Weasley, and Hagrid. She ventures to Draco's room, and he is glaring at her nearly as soon as she enters, but she expects it and ignores it.

"How did you sleep?"

"I had dreams about deer mating with fish, how do you think I slept?"

She scrunches her face. "That's disgusting."

"You're not the one with the mental images. Though they are in thanks to you."

"It's not my fault you have strange sex dreams when you take pain potions, Malfoy."

"They give me too much, that's why."

"Tell them not to."

"I *do*."

Hermione looks around for a chair to pull up to his bed, but doesn't find one. She wonders if she happens to be the only one who has stopped in to visit him. His bedside table is empty of cards or candy, and she realizes that she probably *is*. Draco has friends, but in the distant sort of way that he talks to people sometimes, and she thinks the only people who put up with his crap are probably Neville and she. Her, now... her.

"You left the ring, I'm guessing." She nods and he nods in return, and she wonders if he has ever managed a 'thank you' in his life.

The silence goes on long enough for her to start fidgeting, and she breaks it with the first solid thing that comes to mind. "I saw Harry last night. He told me to tell you he's sorry."

Draco's tapping thumb stops, and his face realigns into the something she can't place. "Is that so."

"Yes. I don't know what he was sorry about, but..." she trails off, knowing by his reaction that he knows *exactly* what Harry is sorry for.

"For something that's none of your fucking business, Granger. And you tell *Potter* ," he spits the name, "that I don't need his fucking *pity*, or *guilt*. You tell him that."

Hermione blinks down in surprise over his sudden flash of anger that darkens his features, and she *really* must find out what all of this is about when she sees Harry later. "Alright, geesh."

His jaw works, his temples moving as he grinds his teeth, and turns his head to look toward the curtain-covered window. Harry's room faces toward the back of the hospital, to where the press cannot reach, but Draco's window faces the front of the hospital directly. She figures he keeps the curtains drawn shut at all times.

She stays with him in his surly silence for another fifteen minutes, trying to make conversation, to which he either replies with short, curt answers, or not at all.

Day: 1437; Hour: 15

"Your scar is gone."

"What? No. No, it's just faded." She approaches his bed tentatively, eyes glued to his forehead, until she is close enough to validate that it is indeed still there.

"That's strange."

"I think it happened once I killed him. It was like... like I could feel him. My head was just... exploding. It was the most intense pain I have ever felt, and I just dropped to my knees. I thought I was going to die after all. That... that maybe I couldn't live without that piece of him inside of me. That all of Moody's paranoid rambling in the beginning, about a Horcrux being inside of me, was really the truth after all."

"It must have been horrible."

"It was. It was, Hermione. I can't even describe it. I blacked out then, and when I came to, I saw Ron lying a little ways away from me. I think the only reason I didn't pass out again was because I was waiting for him to move, so I knew he was alive. When he shut his eyes, I did too, and I woke up here."

Her mind whirled with the information, and she can't stop herself from wondering why they didn't take Harry as well. Then, that rage of paranoia that war brought, wondering if Lupin was hiding Ron's death behind a story of capture so she could get through this too. But, no, because he would have told her when she was back there screaming at him. He wouldn't put her through the idea of hope.

And then, suddenly, all she could see in her mind was the imagined vision of Harry and Ron spread out on the ground, just a couple yards apart. Blood-soaked clothes and trembling bodies exhausted, blue against green as they both waited out the call to unconsciousness to make sure the other was alive. She isn't sure if there was a better way to define them at the end of the war.

"You've survived."

He nods, breathing out, because he probably hasn't grasped it yet. He has lived more than half his life in the looming shadow of Voldemort, and with the knowledge that he might just end up dying by the same wand that took his mother and father. Harry has only known danger and threats, and has spent so long looking for it and living with it, that he is probably more clueless than she as to how to live without it.

They pass the time with idle chatter and by the time he reaches his questions on

how everyone else is doing, she is nervous. She knows, almost certainly, that he will ask about Draco, and she isn't sure just how she should respond.

"Did you see Malfoy again?"

"I did." She holds her breath.

"Did you tell him?"

"I did."

Harry does not ask what Draco's reply was, because she thinks that he knows it wasn't a good response. Instead, he trains his eyes on the fading colors of light through the cracks in the blinds, and is quiet in thought for several beats of her heart.

"I killed Lucius Malfoy, you know." It clicks now; his apology, Draco's fierce reaction to it.

"Good."

Harry gives a small shake of his head. "He was... he had Ron. Ron's wand was gone I think, and he was just... *torturing* him. He gave him that cut. On his face. Did you see it?"

"Yes," she lies, and it hurts.

"I had two Death Eaters fighting me, and one more coming in from the left. I couldn't do anything. He was there, leaning against the side of a tree, about to die, and I did nothing."

"You couldn't, Harry. If you tried, you would have been dead yourself before you even stopped Lucius. And Ron is alive," *is he, is he, is he*? "there's no reason to feel guilty over something that didn't even happen."

"I know. I know this. That's why I don't feel guilty about that. I would... if something had happened, I mean."

"But you killed him."

"Malfoy -- Draco Malfoy. I looked over, and he was there. Had his father's wand in his hand, and his wand was on him. They were saying something, but I don't know

what. Draco, his… hand was shaking. And I just remembered the Astronomy Tower all over again, because that's what it was. Malfoy in front of someone he has to kill, and not being able to do it. He couldn't do it. I saw it."

"So you killed him."

"Yes. Yes, I did. Because I didn't… Because I didn't want Malfoy to change his mind. I didn't want to give him time to decide that he *could*. How can a son live knowing they killed their father, no matter what side they are on? And I didn't blame him one bit, Hermione, because I don't think I could have either. I didn't *want* him to live with that."

"That's understandable."

"It just… it must be something, you know? To have to raise your wand to your own father. It makes me think of just how much he really gave up. It worked out in the end for him, but… Jesus, Hermione, his *father*. Standing in front of him and waiting for you to kill him. And it doesn't matter sides then, does it? Because either way you're going to feel like a monster."

"But you killed him, Harry. You stopped him from having to."

"That's the thing though. I… I killed him, right *in front of* his son. And I *know* how that feels, Hermione. I know what it feels like to have someone murder your father, who you love, no matter what. Then there I was. *Me*. Doing it to someone else."

"There was no choice there, Harry."

"I know! I know there wasn't, but that doesn't make it better, does it? Because I killed a bloke's dad right in front of his face."

"Draco knew it had to be done, Harry. He knew, and that was why he tried to do it himself. If anything, he's more thankful that you took it out of his hands, than he is angry with you."

"I just…" He shakes his head. "Malfoy turned around after, dry heaved into his arm, and he was crying. Not in a real dramatic sort of way, but just enough for me to see his face was wet. Then he turned back around, and… And he looked *right at me*. Right at me, Hermione. And I swear to God I have never felt so guilty about something in all my life. *I* felt like crying. Like puking. It was Lucius Malfoy, and I've never felt so bad about hurting another person."

"You did what had to be done, Harry. He understands that, I'm sure. You have nothing to feel guilty about. Lucius was a horrible, *terrible* human being."

"I know he was. But I just... I don't think I'll ever erase the way he looked at me after. I think I'll live the rest of my life with Malfoy's face, just like that, burned into my brain."

"If it wasn't you, it would be someone else. You did the right thing."

"Maybe," he whispers. "Yes. Yes, I did. But it was so hard after."

"I think the right thing is always the hardest."

"And they say God doesn't want us to be sinners or evil."

She smiles, and he gives her a faint one in reply, sinking back into his pillows, and gazing in quiet sadness at the window again.

Day: 1438; Hour: 17

Hermione hasn't slept since leaving Harry's hospital room, too bent on locating people before exhaustion took her. She has been to three safe houses and five homes, and still only managed to find seven people -- one of them stumbling out of a pub near the hospital as she traveled back to check in on people. Harry had been getting ready to leave and Draco had already been gone. She didn't know how they planned on keeping the news of Ron from Harry for much longer.

She is at the white safe house, staring blankly at the abstract painting still attached to the wall by her gum. It feels like decades since she painted it with Dean. It looks worse than she remembers, though it could be because of her drooping, bleary eyes -- but probably not.

"Where is Malfoy's mother?"

Hermione's head jerks up in surprise, the question random and distant in her exhaustion. "I... don't know."

"Oh." Cho fiddles with the emptiness between her fingers.

"Why?"

"I was at Malfoy Manor this morning and Justin and Anthony were looking at

something out the window. So I went over there, and I saw Malfoy... I guess his father was buried on the property -- he had something set up with his lawyers and a caretaker, I heard, because the Ministry would have just let him rot there."

"I'm sure," Hermione replies when Cho pauses for too long, because she wants to get back to the part about Draco.

"He was just standing there at the grave for awhile. He was a good distance away, but Justin and Anthony said they saw him talking before I got over there. Then he starts digging at the ground... I thought we would have to go out there and stop him. Sometimes people go temporarily insane when they lose someone, you know? And I thought... Well, he wasn't doing *that*. He just dug a little hole and then covered it back up. Justin thinks he changed his mind about digging, but I think he just put something there."

"That's odd."

"Yes. Maybe. But I was just thinking about how hard it must be for him. To have his father die, knowing his son betrayed him. I mean...we don't know who Lucius Malfoy was. An evil man, yes, but we don't know if he was a good family man, or how much he loved Draco. You know?"

Hermione nods, and mutters a "Yes," when she sees that Cho isn't looking at her, poking at her fish instead. She has to wonder when people suddenly started giving a damn about him. When Harry, and Cho, and everyone started caring now when they should have realized it was okay before this. But maybe that was just her. Hermione always saw the humanity in things that other people took awhile to come around to.

"He's alone." Cho shrugs. "His father is dead, his friends are dead or in Azkaban. And you could see it, when I looked at him standing there, and when he walked away. Because he knows he's alone."

He has me, the thought was like a spear through her brain, and she works to keep her expression free from the surprise she feels at it.

"I just wonder where his mother is. If she's in hiding, or departed, or something. I don't know. It was... so sad."

Day: 1438; Hour: 18

The front page of the paper reads '**Victory!**' in large, bold print. Below it is a picture of Harry in glimpses through a wall of guards as he heads to the Apparition

point within St. Mungo's. He gives a curt nod to the photographer before a guard blocks the view, smacking the camera down. The pictures goes to feet, the floor, walls, before focusing back on the guards face and starting all over again.

Hermione rips the two pages of the story out of the paper, folding them carefully, and putting them in her bag. When she gets back to Grimmauld she will put it in her trunk for memories sake. She thinks it is important to carry the good things with them as well.

She falls to the bed loose-limb and aching. She will wake up in three hours, having set the alarm, and that is when she will find Ron. Even if she has to do it herself -- she is not waiting another still second that feels like a frantic year within her.

Day: 1439; Hour: 8

Lupin and McGonagall call a meeting, standing stoically in the front of the room at the Ministry. They discuss the 'final battle', the lack of its finality, and inform them all that they will be going back to where they were before the battle happened -- the safe houses. There is disappointment clouding the air, but it is not prevalent over the sense of victory and survival that has crept in since the news spread.

The last of the Death Eaters still need to be captured before there are celebrations, and before the Death Eaters can hurt more people or produce another Dark Lord. It isn't a done deal that they have won yet. Lupin is stern with this, and the Death Eaters will be out for revenge, and so they should expect everything. She does not know if Lupin and McGonagall's faces seem more severe from their new positions as heads of war now that Moody is gone or because of the war itself.

Hermione travels back to the safe house, noting several people - including Harry and Draco's - lack of presence at the meeting, and the tired way in which they all left the room compared to the jubilation upon entering. Hermione returns from the meeting the same way she had left for it, because Draco has told her these same things all along.

Twenty

They eye the bronze knob with trepidation, no one moving or even breathing, as if the silencing charms hadn't been put in place at all. There is a pause at the other side of the door, and then the rattle again, harder and almost angry.

"Who could that be? Everyone's in bed, silencing charms are up... They are up, right?" Lavender's whispering proves her doubt.

"Lupin?"

"Maybe we shouldn't answer it."

"We're definitely not answering it."

"What if something happened though? Or they need us?" Hermione asks this but makes no attempt to move, and there is silence again until something smacks into the door.

"Shit."

"Hide!" Lavender suddenly reverted back to an eight year-old caught by her parents as she jumped up and searched the room frantically. Hermione hadn't even seen her act like that when it was Death Eaters on the other side of the door.

"The stuff!" Justin yells, grabbing the pouch of Portkeys and flinging it into his suitcase, slamming the top down and sits on it for good measure.

Harold proved useless as he knocks over the chess pieces like the game would give them away, Lavender shoving the maps into the waistband of her pants and covering them with her shirt. Justin, for all his realization that they needed to hide the evidence, simply stands in the middle of the room with his hands in the air at his shoulders. Hermione shoves the plans, markers, and list into her pillowcase.

It is probably comical, the look of innocence they plaster onto their expressions when Harold opens the door. Hermione's breathing stops again when the door pulls back, and she recognizes the shoulder, the arm, the long fingers. She can just see half his face when Harold stops from opening the rest of the way. There's a red dash of coloring across his cheekbone and he's out of breath for some reason she can only guess at. He hasn't moved his eyes off Harold, and Hermione curses under her

breath when the vein at his temple appears. There is only one positive event that causes that, and this certainly isn't that.

That idea gives her pause, and she glances over toward the rest of her partners in crime to see if they are reading the truth all over her. It isn't exactly normal for a man to show up at a woman's door in the middle of the night, and when Lavender shifts and Justin drops his hands, she's convinced they know. Then, suddenly, she wonders if it matters.

Draco doesn't speak for a solid minute, not even after Harold asks him what he needs. The anger pulsing off his stance is frightening. Hermione had never seen him in such a state when he wasn't on a mission or when her own anger wasn't dulling the sharpness of his. It isn't until Harold slouches back and the door opens wider that Draco's eyes find Lavender then Justin's. He breathes out, hard, and his shoulders are slow to relax. The hand clenched around his wand loosens its death grip, and then he looks at her.

Hermione's hit with the revelation of just *why* he was so angry, and there is an ache of feeling at the pit of her stomach that she doesn't dare call excitement. Draco is assessing her, and she almost laughs at the idea of *her* and *Harold*, but the current situation is too volatile for such a reaction. She doesn't think she has ever witnessed a man get that jealous over her, and it thrills her to the point that she imagines she would be snogging the hell out of him if the room was empty.

He knocks his palm into the door, pushing it past Harold's grip and steps into the room. Harold steps back and Draco kicks the door shut behind him, eyes still locked with hers, and if her breathing is unsteady she would never admit to it. There is a predatory quality to the way he looks at her, but not in the way she is used to. It is a calculation in his eyes and a sneer on his mouth that makes her think he *knows* something more than just what he plans on doing to her that's going to make her do all those things he likes for her to do.

"Three Gryffindors and two of their friends, warded up with silencing and locking charms in the dead of the night. You've earned a fail in stealth and full marks in suspicion. I almost wonder how you ever made it through sneaking around Hogwarts, Granger. When are you planning to leave?"

"We don't know what you're--" Lavender starts, but Seamus cuts her off, charging through any weak excuses that wouldn't save them anyway.

"That isn't any of your business, Malfoy."

"I believe it is. An unauthorized mission just looks like you're trying to go hide somewhere. Being that I've stumbled upon this, I don't want to be seen as helping to aid deserters by not reporting it."

"Draco," Hermione whispers, and she doesn't yell because there is something in his face that she recognizes but isn't sure about. A lie.

His eyes meet hers again and holds them, even when Seamus takes up screaming out the offense he feels. "They wouldn't think that, Malfoy! You're much better at helping people in than helping them get out, isn't that right? Like we would come this far just to leave now--"

He wouldn't report her. He would try to convince her to stay, he would try to force her to stay, and if he took her wand and bound her it might have worked. But eventually he would just grow angry and tell her to go. At least, she thinks so.

"We're not deserters, or going rogue… Okay, we're going rogue a little bit, but it's nothing Lupin wouldn't approve of. We just don't have the *time,* Malfoy, and Lupin would make us wait until we--"

And the way he had looked when the door opened, all red in the face and out of breath like he had been exerting himself. He hadn't been at the house earlier that night. He even still had his cloak on. Draco had come for a purpose… her, but for what, she didn't know.

"Seamus, put down your wand," Lavender sighs and plops down on the bed, the maps crunching under her though it isn't heard over the yelling.

"We're just trying to help her friend out." Harold shrugs, obviously not filled with all that Gryffindor bravado that made the chest puff up with indignation at a word like 'deserter'.

"Weasley, I know."

"You can't make me stay." Hermione tells him this with a quiet steel in the now silent room.

Then Draco is back, emerging from the man with the emotions and stance she couldn't understand. His left eyebrow raised, his shoulder hitting the frame of the door as his leg crossed the other. His fingers twirled his wand, and the corner of his mouth lifted up into a smirk that didn't hold much behind it. He was playing a game, and she knew it, covering up for the fact that he was so *unsure* about something.

"I could, if I wanted. But if you want to rush off toward post-death glory, Granger, I'm not going to stop you."

"Then why the fuck are you still here?" Seamus snapped, his face still shining with the sweat of his anger.

"Because it would be a shame to miss you dying in front of me. It might make this whole war a bit more tolerable."

"What?"

"I already know about your lack of brains, Finnigan, so there's no point in proving it so often." Draco rose to his full height, blew the fringe from his eyes and sighed in resignation. "I'm going with you."

Day: 1440; Hour: 1

Hermione wasn't going to plead with him. He ignored her when she brought up the fact that he had just been released from St. Mungo's less than 36 hours ago. He looked bored when she pointed out his injuries. He glared when she brought up the possible consequences, and he grabbed her wrist almost hard enough to bruise when she went to test-poke his shoulder. After much bickering, two almost-to-blows arguments between Draco and Seamus, and many angry glares shared between Hermione and Draco, they were finally on their way.

Hermione knew by now that when Draco set his mind to something, there wasn't much hope in convincing him to do, or think, otherwise. Besides, he was skilled, willing and another person to add to the very short list. At the same time that she felt safer with him here, she was also nervous about his injuries. She couldn't know the extent of them, or how badly he shouldn't be doing this until he showed the weakness of them, and that was a very hard thing to expect of Draco Malfoy.

"I'm telling you, this is a bad idea. We're now in one of the most underused safe houses with *Malfoy*, and no one knows where we are. It's like the perfect setup for him getting away with murder. *Not* that I wouldn't be able to kill him first, but it's the *point* of it, Hermione. Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"First of all, Seamus, do not speak to me like that. Second, if Draco hasn't proved himself to you yet, then he's certainly proved his opinion of you being thickheaded." Hermione snaps, and she would feel bad about it later, but she had reached the end of her patience a long time ago.

Seamus stood, affronted, his Phoenix band hanging limply from a finger as he stares at her. Lavender scratches her temple in a moment of awkwardness, clearly unsure of what side she should take and probably storing the information away to fill in the gossip mongrels that Hermione had defended Draco Malfoy. Again.

Hermione distracts herself from any apologetic feelings by tying the orange band around her arm and humming inside her head. Harold, for his part, remained sitting on the couch with a grin that Hermione had always found incredibly creepy. Lavender's boyfriend didn't seem to have any awareness of *vibes*, Draco had told her several weeks ago. The entire room could be bursting with a dozen emotions, or everyone can be stilled in anger or awkwardness, and it was like the man had no concept. He just... kept smiling, staring at Lavender, or both for full effect.

"I'm guessing someone forgot to get all the layouts." Draco drawls this in a way that lets them know he had realized their incompetency a long time ago.

"What layouts? For the buildings?" Draco doesn't answer Justin, who had also learned by now that the blond didn't respond to questions with obvious answers, so he jumps to explanation instead. "We grabbed all the ones that were there."

Draco stuck his tongue against his cheek and lifted his chin toward Hermione. "I need you to show me what all your little symbols mean."

Hermione followed his retreating back into the kitchen and paused awkwardly behind him when he stops at the table. She has no idea why she feels awkward at all, but there it is. Her emotions have spun like tornadoes the whole war, but especially over the last several days. At St. Mungo's she had been so happy and relieved to see him alive, so sidetracked by Harry's life, Ron's status, and Neville's death, that she didn't have time to think. The last time she had really been alone with him without his eyes dopey and voice slurred from pain medication, she had thought it would be the last time she would see him alive again.

Now here he was, in fairly good health, fully alert, completely *alive*, and *here*. Here for no apparent reason, though one she could guess at but didn't allow herself to because she could not handle being wrong about it. Perhaps she couldn't handle being right about it either. But she wanted to touch him. She wanted to validate the beat of his heart, the warmth of his skin, his breath. That is the reason for her awkwardness - her desire to grab him, or hug him, and her complete lack of knowing if she has the right to now. She needed something to connect her to the world again, because ever since she had woken up to Justin's frantic cries after the death of Voldemort, she has been floating like she had before Draco had dragged her back down to land over a year ago.

He looks over his shoulder, eyebrows raised at her lack of presence at his side, and he pauses. Something skidded past the tired look in his eyes, and it is the first time she has seen him so weary. It almost scares her. She realizes that her body is sagging with the weight of her emotions, and she wonders when it is she began to feel comfortable with him seeing her weakened. She straightens herself out, shaking herself from her thoughts of him, and of everything that has happened the past several days. It isn't time for this yet.

"Granger," it comes out softer than he should be allowed to say it, and it makes her heart pound hard for two beats after.

His eyes flick up, over her head, and his face hardens again, the tired look vanishing from his eyes. She wonders why he allowed her to see it at all. Justin walks past her and to the table, knocking his fist against the worn wood as he looks down at the papers spread out. It takes him a moment but he is not Harold, and when he looks over at her he's almost nervous.

"Alright, let's go then." Draco pulls the papers into one pile, rolling his neck and shooting a glare at Justin. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. I just have to put on my--"

"Then do that."

Justin shot him a glare and Hermione a smile, leaving the kitchen to collect whatever he needed to put on. Seamus was yelling something at Harold about a smile and Lavender was shrieking back in her boyfriend's defense. Draco turns fully toward her, all reserve and emotions as stark as a field of winter.

"I didn't tell you--"

"No, you were too busy with your pity party to remember that time is vital. Isn't that why you went behind the Order's back to do this in the first place?"

Hermione's head pulls back in surprise, and she truly hopes that she looks more angry than offended. "I am fully aware--"

"Then stop standing around like a pile of flesh and move your ass, Granger."

She stays bitterly angry with him and he keeps providing good reasons for it. It isn't until they get back to the safe house, exhausted after a thorough search of an empty building and a half-destroyed house, that she realizes he has been doing it on

purpose. Not once had she been overpowered by any emotion but anger, and that bone-deep tired she had felt in the kitchen had been replaced by a determined fury that had him smirking at her when he thought she didn't see him.

Day: 1440; Hour: 19

She stands in front of his door for three minutes. She doesn't know how many times she has lifted and lowered her arm from the knocking position, or from grabbing for the handle, but it is enough times that her shoulder is beginning to feel sore. She is not a coward, but she would have never gone through with either one, and she knows this even when the door is opening in front of her.

She draws a deep breath in and tastes the liquor in the air as he squints in the light of the hallway. Sometimes she gets so used to seeing him in front of her and in her head that she forgets how beautiful he is, and that is a shame. She blushes now, caught, and a brief look of amusement twists his mouth up at the sight of her. He throws his forearm up against the edge of the door and rests his shoulder on the frame, filling up the doorway.

"I would invite you in, but I'm not sure if you want to enter or if you were just planning on guarding my door all night."

"How did you know I was out here?" She matches his whisper.

"The shadow under the door. I figured it was either you or Finnegan about to attempt murdering me in my sleep."

"Oh," because he is really the only person in the world that could make her extensive vocabulary filter down to the basics at times.

He stands and stares at her long enough to make her shift on her feet, uncomfortable with the way she couldn't read his thoughts. She contemplates making up a lie and walking away, but he always sees through them anyway. He is still waiting for something though, and she hates that he has to make this difficult.

"Do you have any more?" She makes the motion of drinking, and knowing collided with curiosity on his features.

He steps back and to the side, opening the door for her, and has probably come to expect the look of paranoia she flashes over her shoulder. They had all gone to bed twenty minutes ago, so tired that the enthusiastic noises she had expected from Lavender and Harold's temporary room never came.

Draco closes the door behind her and moved past her toward the desk. She has to blink to adjust to the lighting, a lone lamp on the desk the only source of brightness in the room. She wonders if this was a Bad Idea that she came, if he is finished with this…this…relationship now that the war was almost over. She wonders if she looks clingy or needy because that is the last thing she wants to look like, and the thought keeps her blushing even after he was making his way back to her.

He comes to a stop a foot in front of her, the dark liquid swirling inside the glass he holds. She holds her hand out for it, and when he doesn't move to give it to her she looks up to find him staring down at her. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

There is something in the way he looks at her that tells her he is going through and discarding all the possible things to say as well, and the silence grows so thick she has trouble breathing. There are so many things she would like to tell him, and ask him, but that would be digging up a lot of the things she is pretty bent on trying to ignore. She just wants to stop thinking and wondering, and she imagines he feels the same. It was why they started this in the first place.

He moves then, fluidly and decidedly, reaching out to place the glass down on the dresser with one hand and to grab her hip with the other. She isn't sure if she moves at the same time or just after, but it feels as if she is stepping forward the moment he reaches out. Then her hands are clenched in his shirt, and she is pressing into him too hard to not be telling. He bends as she pulls and then she is kissing him, a collision of mouths and tongues that tells her she needed this more than she even thought she did.

"God," she breathes, reaching up to grasp his face, fingers sliding into the hair above his ears.

He *humphs* a breath against her mouth and reaches down to grab the back of her legs, hoisting her up and against him. Hermione cannot slow her hands, tracking the angles of his face, his neck, the dips of his shoulders. She squeezes and yanks, wrapping her legs so tightly around his hips that the muscles burn. She kisses him hard, teeth clinking, their tongues in a battle for dominance, for need, for something only the other could give.

His hands fold out, fingers spread as if to feel as much as possible against all of him, his hands seeking her waist, her bum, any exposed skin. He trusts her to hold on, reaching between them to unbutton her pants, and he slides a hand under the back of her shirt. His hand is cool against her skin, pressing into her back as the other grabs the hem of her shirt and yanks it up.

Hermione pants for air, gulping in the oxygen as she lifts her arms and they struggle her out of the fabric. He flings it somewhere over her head, and she grasps the material at his shoulders and yanks up, suddenly desperate for the feel of his skin against hers. He kisses the top of her breasts, her neck, her chin, and then her lips again, their whole bodies moving with the struggle for air and the ignorance of making it a priority over keeping their mouths on one another. If she was being clingy and needy now, he forces her not to care, to accept it as the only way to go about this.

She falls back into the bed before she even realizes that he had been walking them toward it, and she gasps in three breaths to make up for the oxygen that leaves her under the sudden crush of his body. He plants a hand into mattress at her shoulder and lifts himself up, pulling his shirt over his head as her hands greet each inch of skin as it is revealed to her.

He throws his shirt over his shoulder and looks down at her, bringing a pause to their frantic movements. His hair is shooting up in every direction from the static cling of his shirt, his cheeks flushed and his eyes dark. This is how she likes him best, exposed and out of control. She arches her hips up and against him and Draco groans, low and rough, one hand sinking into her hair to pull her mouth back to him as he sunk back down and against her. The other pushes under her, around her, the muscles in his arm contracting against her back as he pulls her up, crushing her chest to his. His hand squeezes her hip, wraps around the back of her head, and he devours her in a way that makes her think she has the ability to make him clingy and needy as well.

She is dizzy, hot, and *all over him*. She is the one to wrench her mouth away first, pulling in her breath so hard she wouldn't be surprised if they could hear it across the house. He is just as loud, untangling his hand from her hair to brace himself against the mattress, pushing up as her hands travel from his back to his chest. He kisses her neck, her collarbones, her breasts and down as he pulls back to grab the waist of her jeans, and she realizes that she's trembling.

He stands, leaving her cold as he yanks her pants and underwear off in one rushed pull. He looks down at her in a way that makes her stomach sink in and a smile to turn up her swollen lips, and he grins back wolfishly. She laughs then, because she feels absurd, but doesn't know why. The grin slowly falls away from his face as his eyes rake down her body, and she ignores the urge to cover herself or wiggle about in her insecurity - he had shown her time and times again that that is the last reaction he wants from her, and that she has nothing to feel insecure about with him, not in this. He bends to push his pants to the floor, and when he stands up again he is back to being that dark sort of predatory that frightens her a little and

thrills her far more.

God, the amount of days and months she could spend just staring at him like this. Fully aroused in all possible ways, and every dip and contour of his muscles, his skin, his bones that she could spend years exploring but still not know enough of.

"Dra--" she breathes in a hushed tone, but still cuts herself off.

She feels the tip of her ears drag up at another creak in the hallway past the door, and now she knows why he was taking so damn long to get back to her. A door shuts and a light cough comes from the direction of the bathroom. She looks from the door back at Draco, the weariness making a slow creep back into his expression, and *oh no*. Oh no because she isn't going to go back to the awkward girl standing in front of his door with her arm raised and not knowing what to say. Because she is refusing to let him stand there in front of her *like that*, and her on his bed *like this*, and let *anyone* send her back to her room to take care of herself and wish it were him.

They were too fragile, the both of them. If she walked away now, she had no way of knowing if he would open the door for her again. He had proved he still wanted her, and she knew that in some way she would not think about, she needed him. So she stops thinking, and she stops being so afraid. He keeps staring at her cautiously, guardedly when she pushes herself up to her knees, and still doesn't seem to get it when she pushes up and kisses him again. His fingers wrap around her arm, and he kisses her back like he is unsure, and she does not like that at all. Since when had he cared if other people were outside the door?

Her breath is stuttered when she pulls back, and she feels something akin to rejection burning hot at the bottom of her stomach. Confusion morphs his face and his fingers squeeze tighter around her arm as she sinks back down. The action takes her attention away from trying to avoid his eyes and she looks back up at him, trying to remember where he threw her clothes. His head is cocked, his eyes dashing across the plains of her face, and he pulls her back up. He kisses her and she holds her breath, exhaling loudly when he pulls back to look at her. Another kiss, another pull back just as she begins to return it. Hermione's expression gives way to her surprise as comprehension hits that he is testing her. Besides the darkness of his eyes and his swollen mouth, he looks the same as when she has watched him form plans alone in the meeting room. Searching for all possibilities, focused and scrutinizing, with a raw sort of dedication.

What a stupid man. Or, perhaps, he had every reason to think she wanted to bolt the moment she heard one of her friends just outside the door. Hadn't that been

what she had done every time she did? She would pick it all apart later, when she had the patience, but that was the last thing she had now.

She is forceful when she grabs the back of his neck and has him meet her halfway, stealing his mouth and pulling him down with her. He follows willingly though, breathing out harshly, and when a door opens and she's still kissing him he finally wraps his arms back around her again.

Day: 1441; Hour: 5

She still does not spend the night with him. It is not that she is ashamed of him, and she hopes he knows this. It is just that it is *easier* for people to not know, and she needs that. This thing between them has always been difficult with just them, let alone if everyone knew. She didn't want to face the whispers that trailed behind Lavender's feet, the accusation of her friends, or for anyone to make her feel like she was less of a person because she was "shagging Malfoy". And it wasn't just because it was *him*, but because of the whole shagging aspect. She wasn't even in a dedicated relationship with him. Draco was not her boyfriend, and she *didn't even know* if this whole thing would last from one day to the next.

If it was something solid that she could hold onto and fight for, then she would have. She would. But she didn't even really know how he felt about her, and while she would fight for him and the person he had become, she didn't think she had the room to fight for *them*, as something that was bound together no matter what anyone thought of it. Hell, her friends had a hard enough time just knowing they were friends.

But there had been a look in his eyes that, if she hadn't been so worn out, would have cost her sleep that night. She almost wanted to tell everyone, if only to make sure that he never looked at her like that again. She was just scared of so many things, like him calling it off because it looked like she was too serious about it, telling her friends because it mattered enough for them to know. She was scared of how it would feel when he left her and they all knew. The pity, the jokes, the feeling of inadequacy. She would have her own emotions to deal with then, and she did not need them to add to those.

She had never been one for taking the easy road though, despite her excuses, and she knew that it was *shame* that filled her when she walked away from his bedroom. She had been the one to establish leaving after sex, and he had been the one to change it. It has been her that has always been afraid of people finding out, and him that accepted it. She counted her mistakes like the bruises he left along her skin, and she felt like a coward. There were just so many hard things here, she did not

want to add another.

Day: 1441; Hour: 10

Hermione gasps so hard she chokes on it, yanking Lavender toward her with enough force to throw them both back against the wall. Seamus had the wand of the Death Eater in his hand before the green smoke of the Killing Curse had evaporated from where Lavender's shoulder had been. Draco had him bound not a second later as Justin dug through his pockets for the pouch that held the Ministry Portkeys. Hermione clung to Lavender's shoulders a bit longer than she should have during a mission, and if Lavender's shoulders were shaking beneath her sweaty palms she wasn't going to point it out.

"Are you okay?" Hermione looks at Lavender as she pulled away, nodding but visibly shaken.

"Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit." Harold places a hand on her shoulder but Lavender pulls away from it, shaking out her arms, feeling the flow of blood that means she is alive.

"Should we interrogate him?" Seamus nods toward the boy, and Draco shakes his head, eyes darting all around them.

"He's too young. He won't know anything."

Seamus ignores this and is looking toward the rest of them, but when they don't answer he rolls his eyes. "I guess I'll take your word for it, seeing as how you have some real inside information as to how the Death Eaters work."

"Well, if you want," Draco begins in a drawl, but his voice turns hard, "I can free him and let him take you with him so you can get some *insider information* for yourself--"

"Guys," Hermione cuts off the next big blowout, watching Harold shake the boy hard enough to look like a lifeless doll in the hands of an excited three year-old.

"Do you know where Ron Weasley is? Sandra Colack, Peter Hemmings?"

"Send him to the Ministry. He won't talk until he's under Veritaserum."

Draco is probably right, judging by the look of defiance the boy stared back at them with. They also tried for fifteen minutes on one of the other young Death

Eaters they had found in the house, and that had proved a complete waste of time. Justin pushed the Portkey into the hollow of the boy's throat, standing up as he vanished to the Ministry.

That was the fourth they had sent back, and after another round of searching the house, the last they would find (or that would find them). Hermione tries to tell herself it wasn't pointless, because they still caught four Death Eaters, low in rank or not. It doesn't make her feel less frustrated or anxious.

Day: 1441; Hour: 17

"How did you know?" Hermione waits for him to look up at her in confusion before she grabs the bag of crackers out of his hand.

Confusion turns into a glare as he reaches forward and grabs her wrist, just in time for her to switch hands. "Know what?"

He moves back to his side of the couch, grabbing the remote in case she decides to make a go for that as well. They both had trouble sleeping all the time. He was out of liquor, a new sleeping method for him, and she was out of her mind with thinking.

"What I was planning to do. With Ron."

"Please. You're as predictable as the taste of pumpkin juice."

She pauses in her dig for a cracker, glares at him, then finally rips the bag more for better access. "Are you calling me boring?"

He snorts, flipping the channel to those exercise infomercials he loved so much. "Hardly."

"Good," she sniffs, munches on a cracker.

"You knew Potter was fine. The entire world knew Potter was fine. Once I found out about Weasley, I knew exactly what you would be doing. Rushing off into peril with your happy-to-die ex-Gryffindors, going to fight the good fight."

She snorted this time, her mouth dry from the crackers and she eyes his drink. "Hypocrite. You're fighting the good fight as well. *And* you're here to go 'rush off into peril' with us."

"Well, someone has to survive to tell the story to future generations. A lesson to future Gryffindors, showing them the proof in history of how stupid their House is. Though, knowing you lot, they would likely weep tears of joy at the *bravery* of it all."

"Right," she rolls her eyes and sucks her tongue off the roof of her mouth.

He is an ex-Slytherin, and proves the traits of his own House when he waits until she has forgotten and grown comfortable, ripping the bag of crackers out of her hand with a smirk. He looks completely surprised when she tackles him.

Twenty-One

Day: 1442; Hour: 8

Lavender has been staring at her for ten minutes now, and Hermione stabs her scrambled eggs with annoyance. "*What*?"

"Do you think we've made history?"

"What?" Hermione asks again, looking up.

She feels bad for sounding so annoyed, but the morning found her with little sleep and a horrible headache. She felt hungover despite that she couldn't even remember the last time she had drank alcohol. Justin and Seamus were mostly to blame, full out screaming at one another for the past twenty minutes about *Quidditch* of all possible things. Of course it wasn't *really* about Quidditch, just like how Draco opted for a shower instead of her yelling at him about pancakes ten minutes ago. In order to avoid the bigger issues, they were all concentrating on the smaller ones. It was called coping, and Hermione didn't think any of them could be at blame for that.

Except Justin and Seamus of course, because her head was *pounding*.

"What we've done. I mean, the war will...Harry will. Maybe Ron. But do you think we will be in there as well?" Lavender doesn't even pause long enough for Hermione to exhale before she's talking again. "I was just thinking about Hogwarts, and history classes. Reading the stories of dead people - I *hated* that."

"It isn't just stories about dead people, Lavender. History is made up of people who did great things...great good, or great evil, but great things that somehow shaped the world into what we know of it. It's important to know."

"Why? I mean, I just keep thinking... All of this. It's all just going to be in books that students are going to hate reading about, you know?"

"Then why do you care if your name is in it?"

"I don't know. Well...just, credit, you know? If they're going to talk about it, I think they should talk about every one of us."

Hermione scratched at her cuticle, her nails short and cracked. "Our sacrifices

only matter to us, Lav. Everything that was lost here, they just can't put that all down. Even if they did, people wouldn't *get it*. Not like we do. That doesn't matter. We know what this was, and what we--"

"You just said it was import--"

"The *outcome* is important. The main events that led us to that outcome are important. For people to know that there was struggle, and to know that there were people that had to meet it, that's important. Lists of names aren't. I don't care if I'm a footnote or nothing at all, I know what I gave and it gave back, and that is *enough* for me."

"So you mean to say we're not important?"

"Not to history books, no. But it doesn't matter, don't you see that? History will remember us as the Order, and the Ministry, and the brave ones. History will remember us because it was *us* that sacrificed for that "important outcome". It doesn't matter if they list all of our names for people to skim over and just think about how long the damn list is. They will just know that it was that blob of a list that caused the events at the end of the chapter. But it was never about making history, Lavender. It was about changing the future."

"Well, they should care enough to read the list, and then maybe--" Lavender started, her face pinched in annoyance that grew sharper when laughter cut her off.

"Wasn't that you I heard bitching from the hall about hating to read a dead person's story at school?" Draco glowered at her, his thought that she was a hypocrite all over his face.

"What are you doing? You are getting a glass for that, right?" Hermione cut off Lavender's response, pointing at him and the open jug of orange juice grasped in his hand.

He raised an eyebrow and turned, sauntering away with both girls glaring at his back.

Day: 1442; Hour: 15

They find the building in ashes, wood still smoldering with the crawl of fire and smoke still darkening the sky. Tree branches bow out to them, weighed heavy with ash and the buds of coming spring. They couldn't help but wonder if *they* had known they were coming.

Day: 1442; Hour: 21

"It doesn't bother you?" Draco asks this question out of nowhere, and she jumps because she didn't even know he was in the room. She had been too busy staring at the jug of orange juice and wondering why he had put it back. Gross.

"What?" Then again, she doubts that she has room to talk about his germs.

"That Potter will be raved about in history as if he did the whole damn thing singlehandedly."

"He deserves it."

"We don't?"

She finally turns from the fridge, questions about jealousy on her tongue but she swallows them. She will not go there, because she doesn't think he deserves for her to. "Harry has lived his whole life with this as his destiny. He sacrificed a lot--"

"Yes, living with Weasley in some comfortable housing, having every Ministry and Order high-up with their heads shoved up his ass and--"

"Don't you *dare* take away from what he's gone through and has done. If Harry hadn't been able to kill Voldemort, we would have lost no matter what we-"

"And if we hadn't fought for *years* before that, Potter would have been dead along with--"

"Harry didn't have the choice like we did! He--"

"No one had a choice! Everyone who ended up in this fucking war did it because they didn't have another choice! Whether it be because they knew the world would go to hell along with their own lives, or because they were trying to guarantee the survival of their friends, family, or their own selves, no one had the *choice*."

"That is a lie! Ev--"

"You're so bloody stupid! You are so unaware of the bullshit that comes out of your mouth, and I can't help but wonder if you're one of those liars who can't convince anyone but themselves about what they say!"

"What are you *on* about?" Hermione exclaimed, throwing up her hands.

"All that *shit* you fed to Brown. I know your mighty noble act, Granger, and--"

"That was the truth!"

"*Bullshit*! Bull. Shit. You've given up all you know of your former life to be in this war, and with a sacrifice like that, you want to be remembered for it. Everyone in the world wants to be remembered for something, and--"

"Don't pretend you know me! Don't. You. Dare. Because if you knew me at all, you would know that I don't want to be remembered for this! I don't want to be remembered for having killed people, and--"

"Oh, *come off it*, you--"

"--something that bettered society, and wasn't achieved through violent means but--"

"--fucking high horse, always taking the high road but ducking your head--"

"--not that I'm not proud of having done the best I could here, but I don't need some sort of--"

"--like it or not, that's what had to be done, and what has *always* had to be done. People know that when you--"

"--have a choice. *You* had a choice, and you chose to--"

"--with... I never had a choice! No one did! Why is that so hard for you to--"

"--just as much as I did, and Neville, and Ron, and--"

"--everything in our lives shapes us to the road we're ultimately going to take. I'm talking about survival here; I'm talking about the best option. And *no one* is going to run away from this when it means they will lose the things most important to--"

"--and fine, maybe Harry did have a choice, but it wasn't much of one. Was he just going to stand around and let people die? That's not in his character, and--"

"Exactly! Fucking *exactly*! Potter wasn't going to let people die, because of his character, because who he was and how he felt made it so that he didn't have a choice--"

"That's exactly what I've been trying to say!"

"You--"

"Jesus, Draco! You're...you're so..." Hermione yells, or growls, or something in between and slams the fridge door shut. Something falls, shatters inside, but she's already walking away and far too angry to care about a mess.

She makes it five steps into the living room before he grabs her arm, flinging her back so hard there is a moment of pain in which she is sure he has pulled her arm out of the socket. She stumbles back against him and jerks forward to break the contact nearly as quickly as she had found herself there.

"Why the hell is it always about Potter for you?" Draco screams this question in such a way that, despite the loud volume just seconds ago, makes her jump.

"What?" She doesn't know why this comes out as a whisper, or why she is so slow to turn around and face him.

"The same thing I've been trying to tell you about everyone involved in this war, you just can't get unless I say it is directly and only pertaining to Potter. As if everyone else doesn't matter as much."

"I never said that! I never even--"

"Yes, you have. Yes, you have, and a thousand times over! It's in everything you do! You don't care if no one else is named for helping win the war, just as long as Potter is. It was Potter that didn't have a choice, the rest of us did. It was Potter--"

"Shut up."

"No, I don't think I will. It was Potter who would win this whole thing, and what we did just didn't matter nearly as much. It was Potter who didn't choose *you* to go with him, and it was Potter who built up this whole insecure bullshit that you have that you aren't good enough, or worthy enough, or didn't *give* enough to earn a fucking *footnote* in--"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" She jerks out of his grasp when she notices that she is still in it, matching his glare, but his seems harder somehow.

"I know exactly what I'm talking about, and I know exactly who you are, Granger, despite that you don't think I do," it won't be until later that she will think of this,

remember, and feel bad. "Despite that I'm not Potter, so I must not."

"You're out of your mind! You know me just as well as Harry now, and perhaps..." She trails off. Did he? He is sneering down at her.

"Perhaps you should start judging your own worth rather than taking it as whatever you think Potter deems it to be--"

"That--"

"I know the real reason why you don't care about being mentioned in history. I know that you know it as well. You're not ashamed of your participation in this war, don't pretend you are. You're ashamed that it wasn't enough. But Potter? Potter's *must* be enough, so he should get credit where credit--"

"I--"

"You're fighting an entire war to prove to the other side that you're worthy of everything they are. Why is it different when it comes to your friends, Granger? What the hell is wrong with you?"

She stares up at him, jaw slack, and then shoves him. She slams two open palms into his chest and thrusts her weight forward, and then she does it again. He doesn't come after her when she leaves this time.

Day: 1443; Hour: 13

"This is getting excessive."

"No shit," Seamus mutters darkly, staring at the cottage in front of them, the flames vicious and hot against their faces.

"It's like they know our next move before we even get here. Step ahead or whatever." Lavender sighs heavily and yanks her foot from the mud she was sinking in.

Hermione pauses with Lavender's thoughts, turning to look at Harold and is surprised to find Draco already staring at him. Because war makes you paranoid - because Draco does. Because Harold was new amongst bonds of trust, and war formed things like spies and weak lines. Draco looked away before Harold caught them, but Hermione is forced to drop her awkward eyes to Draco's shoes as they turn in the slosh.

"Let's go."

Day: 1443; Hour: 19

"I might be sorry."

Draco raises his eyebrows in that way that tells her 'this is going to be interesting' while managing to look completely *dis*interested. Hermione then realizes that her nose is sticking straight up in the air and for someone who is trying to apologize it looks too much like she is expecting one. She might be.

"I shouldn't have shoved you like that. I realize that I might have…Harry issues," a twitch of a smirk and she glares at it. "It's a long process, to try to define yourself when you lose the things that used to…but I'm sure you know all about that. In a harder way, even."

"Granger, have you been drinking?" She glares at him, her hands dropping the nervous yanking of her fingers and her shoulders pulling back from their slump. Later she'll wonder if that had been his point - he has a harsh sort of kindness to him, and he also grew uncomfortable with her emotions.

"You *do* know me, Draco. So there's no reason for me to tell you that it wasn't just because of recovery time that I didn't invite Harry to come with us. I can be petty, maybe. I'm holding a grudge. And…and I want him to see what's like, I guess, and God that sounds so bad when I say it out loud."

"Don't worry, Granger. I'm well acquainted with the darker sides of you." He is acting as if the parchment with three lines written on it is in a secret code he's trying to figure out. Really, she knows it is because he's paying close attention but he doesn't want to look the part.

"I know," she whispers, and is a little surprised when the shame does not come. Perhaps because he never made her feel as if it was something to be ashamed of. "You most of all, I would think. But there's another reason why I didn't tell Harry - I didn't think to, not until later. Because I'm not defined by him or Ron. I love them, but they no longer make up who I am. And I just…I just didn't realize until after I left that it was even an option to bring Harry."

"And you don't judge your worth by what Potter thinks of you?" Draco raises an eyebrow and sits back, leveling his stare on her and giving up the pretense.

"Don't we all judge our worth by what our friends and family think of us? On how

we are to other people?"

"I would have killed myself a long time ago," Draco drawls, and Hermione has no idea how she can laugh about that, but she does. She is gratified by the slow smile on his lips before ducking her head to regain her point.

"There's a big part of me that takes into account what my friends judge of my worth, I'll admit that, and I don't know if that will ever change. But there's still a part of me that is proud of who I am despite anything - that's why I'm 'bossy' when no one likes it, and why I was smart when it wasn't cool, for example."

"You certainly never had a problem with either of those." He smirked and she throws her bag of popcorn at him in retaliation, the kernels flying all over his lap and the couch. She makes a disgruntled noise when he grabs a handful and he laughs at her.

"I saw how Harry was in school. I could only imagine how bad it was for him during the war. Harry is the sort of man who reads the list of casualties and blames himself for every one of them - you have to understand that. Ron and I, growing up, we just sort of knew we were the sidekicks to Harry. It took a long time to get over that."

"You're still not over it, Granger."

"Maybe not. But I understand that we all played our parts, and maybe we fought more than he did. But there is no way Harry ever gave less heart than anyone that fought in this war. He deserves--"

"I never said he didn't."

Hermione shrugs, walking toward him as he continued to munch on her popcorn. His eyes narrow at her growing proximity, and she can see his fingers tighten around the bag. "I just want you to know that I was honest when I said I didn't care about history. It's the future I want a part in, and I'll make my name there."

"Freeing house-elves, volunteer work in Africa, running the Ministry, adopting sick children, inventing the cure for insanity and at least thirty-five diseases within the first ten years?"

She smiled widely at him. "You know me so well," because she thought it was important that she say it again, the guilt still lingering over her accusation that he didn't.

He hums and jerks the bag over his head when she makes a quick lunge for it. She falls forward and snaps her hand up to catch her balance on his forehead, quickly planting her foot to the side of his leg to launch herself up toward his raised hand. He brings his arm back down again with a laugh and she growls at him.

"You have an obsession with snacks. God knows how many times we've found ourselves in this same--"

She is momentarily taken back by his reference to Muggle faith. She smiles because she knows it is because of her. "I think it's only fair to say that we both have an obsession--"

"No, I *like* snacks, *you* attack for the sake of them." Her attempts at chasing his darting hand were proving futile. "As far as obsession, I believe you ha--"

"Draco, come on, that's the last of them, and *I*

"I'm sorry, did I give the impression I could be swayed by your half-ass--"

"You *will* give those back--"

"--and threats?"

"*Malfoy*."

"Did...did you just *whine* at me?"

"No," she blushes, and collapses down into the couch next to him, glaring as he switches the bag to his other hand and holds it away from her.

"I've never heard you whine before," he sounds completely amused. "Well, except--"

"Shut up."

But it's gotten the idea in his head because he's giving her that half-lidded cocky look that always makes her breath come a little faster. "You know, you can earn them back."

Hermione is quick with her plan, because she has always been quick with

planning. "Is that so?"

He sticks his tongue against his cheek when she moves to sit on his lap, and there's a lightness in his eyes that she always likes to put there. "Something can be arranged, I'm sure."

"And what do you want?" She runs her hands up his chest and to his shoulders, blushing as she asks because that sort of thing can't be helped with her.

"I'm not sure," he feigns disinterest, humming in bored contemplation, but his hand runs up her thigh in a manner too possessive for his act.

She isn't used to this sort of playful with him, or anyone really, so she bows her head to speak against his neck. "I'm sure you can think of something."

She kisses him under his jaw, marking a hot path up to his ear, and hates how she's already breathing too fast. He flexes his hips up in reaction, and she can swear his heart is picking up tempo under her tongue. Perhaps she isn't the only one so easily affected.

His hands come up to her hips, his mouth down to her shoulder, and she almost backs out of her plan. It's really the principle by now though, and so she slides her hands down his arms, hearing the crinkling of the bag in his left hand. She's about to go for it when he pushes back into the cushion and ducks his chin, forcing her to lift her head from him. She can feel her heart pound harder with the look he gives her, his right hand coming up to grasp her face as he pulls her down to his mouth. His tongue flicks and winds around hers, and when she grinds down he grinds back up into her, and really, screw the popcorn.

Her hands leave his arms for the hem of his shirt, and his arm encircles her, the bag crinkling on impact with the floor as he drops it. She is just about to suggest a bedroom when she feels the smile on his lips, and her hands pause in their exploration of his skin as he pulls back.

"I win," he breathes, and makes to kiss her again, but she pulls back this time.

"What?"

"Distract me with the promise of sex in order to get the bag? I would say well played, love, but it wasn't."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, and she is sure her lips would have been thinning

had they not already felt swollen. He laughs, and his thumb brushes across her cheekbone in a move so affectionate she's automatically not angry with him. She thinks this might be a dangerous thing.

She *feels* something that has her face dropping the saucy look and her eyes darting up and away from the welcoming dark grey in front of her. Lavender is walking silently into the room, stifling a yawn, her eyes glued to the white of Draco's head. Hermione is positive her heart and breath have stopped, but not in the way that she is aware of it. The world goes strangely out of focus, and though a thousand things shoot across the forefront of her mind, she remains statuesque and silent.

"Draco, do you have the plans and layouts for tomorrow?"

Draco's whole body goes stiff under hers, and Hermione thinks it's too late of a reaction. "Why?"

Lavender continues walking into the room as if it's completely normal. As if finding Hermione Granger sitting in the lap of Draco Malfoy is something she sees everyday. Hermione's vision is blurred, and she realizes - because she has known it well enough - that this is full-blown panic mode. Her hands shake on Draco's shoulders, his hand falls away from her face, but his arm still remains around her and she doesn't know *why*.

Though it really is too late to come up with excuses. *I was examining his teeth, I was trying to experiment with textures, I'm completely pissed so I don't even know where I am - oh,* is *that Draco Malfoy?*

"Hermione." She breaks from her thoughts to focus on him, and he must be reading the wild look on her face because it is rare for him to say her name, and like that. She becomes aware of his hand at her hip and the slight pressure that lets her know it's time to get off his lap.

"Right," she practically chokes the word out, and Draco is still giving her that inscrutable look as she backs up and onto her numb feet.

"So? Can Harold and I look at them, or are you just going to keep them all to yourself? You know we have the right-- sorry for interrupting, Hermione - but we have the right to look at those plans..."

Lavender's voice trailed away as Hermione somehow made it to her bedroom. She closed her eyes and pressed her back to the door, trying to control her erratic breathing and calm her mind so she can actually *think*.

Draco did not come that night.

Day: 1444; Hour: 11

"Why the hell are you so twitchy?"

Hermione jumped, spilling hot tea onto her hand, and hissing through her teeth. "Wh-what?"

She had slept for two hours and twelve minutes last night. Probably less, but the clock had read 3:55 when she closed her eyes for the last time, and though it took her awhile to fall asleep after, she was counting those twelve minutes as sleep. Sometimes she lied to herself about how much sleep she got, a whole "mind-over-matter" business to keep her from trying to convince herself it was *understandable* if she head-on-table drooled the day away.

It had taken awhile for her to calm down enough to even begin to think of what had just happened. Then, as her analytical mind has the habit of doing, she tore each moment to pieces and evaluated them until her head felt numb. Draco and Lavender's utter lack of a reaction meant that neither one seemed to care. Though Hermione had been a bit too out of it to notice if Lavender was internally jumping for joy over the biggest bit of gossip to hit since...well, Hermione didn't even know when. Draco *had* tensed, but Hermione found by the yelling outside her door it was more to do with Harold requesting the plans and Draco's raging paranoia.

Hermione had The Epiphany around 9:27 that morning. While picking apart body language and contemplating ways to keep Lavender quiet, she quite suddenly asked herself why she even cared. Ron would have a heart attack, Harry might die of shock, and whispers of rumors and cruel words would follow her for God knew how long.

Hermione realized that there wasn't much of a reason to keep it such a secret. It wasn't like Draco was a Death Eater or something, and if he was, the whole thing wouldn't have started anyway. Draco's words had dug at her gut after The Epiphany when she *got it*. When she understood that the whole reason she was hiding the thing from everyone was because she wanted to escape their judgment, the attacks on her character, the decline *in her worth*. Had that been part of what he had been talking about all this time? And furthermore, *guilt*, as dark and ugly as the hatred on a battlefield overwhelmed her with its suggestion - Draco probably thought she was *ashamed* of him. Why wouldn't he? She was hiding the fact that *he*, of all people, was her...lover, because of the fallout of associating herself with him. Because being with him was a decline in *her worth*, and how horrible was it for him to think that.

To know it, even.

She had been ashamed, in the beginning of it all. Then the hiding was just normal, and it was so much *easier* to have it be a secret than to deal with the reactions of it being out in the open. She had enough to worry about, let alone the task of defending her character. Of defending his. That was the excuse she made, even after seeing his reaction the other night, when someone had been outside the door. She had tried to ignore it, to make her line of logical excuses. But now that she actually let herself think about the entire situation, she felt horrible. Guilt-ridden and burdened more by the idea that he had known about how she felt with *worth* than the idea of what was to come when other people found out.

At 10:02, she stopped caring. So, they would know. They would know that she was having a sexual relationship with someone who was not her boyfriend. They would know that it was Draco Malfoy; respected, feared, and hated Malfoy. The whispers and looks that exploded behind Lavender's back would now be behind hers, and maybe worse. But Hermione had faced Death Eaters, war, murder, and the death of her friends. Everything paled in comparison to that. She was not afraid.

Just, as Lavender pointed out, *twitchy*.

"Is this about last night?" Lavender whispers this, causing Hermione to raise her eyes to hers in surprise of her caution.

Hermione didn't know how people would react, and what they would say. She is nervous, because it takes someone saying something harsh for to be angry. "Yes."

"Hermione," Lavender laughs, takes a bite of her pancake, shakes her head. "What's the difference between people knowing and people seeing? Come on."

"What?" She is unintelligent in the morning. Fine, just when she's unsure. "You already knew?"

Lavender looks at her like Hermione might be playing a game, and then like she is naïve. Hermione takes great offense. "How could I not? Do you notice how often I'm in the same place as you two? You've had the whole shagging vibe going *forever*, and *please* -- do you guys realize how loud you can be sometimes? There's no mistaking certain sounds you know."

Hermione's eyes are large and blink unseeing at her cup of tea, face hot and body awkward. "So everyone knows?"

"I don't know. No one really talks about it. There's other things to worry about it, you know?"

"No one says anything?" Hermione looks up, eyebrow arched in disbelief.

Lavender looks at her a little too long before dropping her eyes to her breakfast, shrugging. "Nothing important, Hermione. Nothing that matters."

"Oh." That, then. "How long have you known?"

"Merlin...a year? Maybe more, maybe less. I heard your bed squeaking one night, and...fine, I spied, and there's no one else with that white hair that could have been walking out of your door later, you know?"

A year? She had known for *that long*, and whoever else had as well, and Hermione had just kept on going unaware? It was all old news then. Jesus.

"I'll admit, I wouldn't think Draco, of all people, you know? I figured you would find a more...well, you know. And I already tried out that--" Hermione's head shot up so fast and her glare so intense that Lavender immediately stops and pushes back in her chair.

Lavender could have been a hypocrite and called her anything she wanted, but the *last* thing Hermione was willing to hear from her was about her past hookups with Draco. By the look on Lavender's face she understands, belatedly, that she might have given something more away by the fierceness of her reaction.

"Hermione," Lavender whispers, and Hermione blushes, drops her head, breathes in deep. "It's okay. I mean, it happens, you know? And...and who really cares anymore."

"Right."

"The war will be completely over soon, and we're all going to move on with our lives and forget about the stupid stuff that happened here. Malfoy will probably go disappear, and Harold and I will marry, and you'll be back with Harry and Ron. It'll all go back to...to a kind of normal."

Hermione doesn't notice that she stopped breathing until she only hears Lavender's in the long silence of the room. If her voice comes out thick, Lavender pretends to not hear it. "Right."

Twenty-Two

Day: 1444; Hour: 14

Missions were almost always at night unless they were an emergency or they discovered something that forced them to be during the day. Wards were placed around most Death Eater spots in the Wizarding World, and any magic like concealment charms were a dead giveaway to the Order's presence. Darkness was the natural concealment they were forced to use. Hermione had grown used to sleeping when it was light out, and not sleeping at all.

"If these are in the Muggle world, why can't we do it during the day? It's not like--"

"Because we're sort of on the run." Justin smiles about this in a way that suggests he might be hanging out with too many Gryffindors.

"If we run into anyone we're going to have to use magic anyway - if that happens, we're going to the second plan to control the situation and search the house then get out quickly. Not using magic beforehand, when it's unnecessary, buys us time." Draco made his first appearance that day, and Hermione hoped no one noticed her jump at the sound of his voice behind her.

He walks past her and to the fridge, but he doesn't meet her eyes. There's probably a dozen things she wants to ask him, but only one that she actually will - did he know before. He didn't seem surprised at Lavender's flippant attitude toward finding them, and he acted like it was fairly normal himself. At least that's what she remembered in her panic mode. She would also like to ask him things about the status of their "relationship" now, but she wouldn't dare.

It might have always been a guessing game about how he felt, but that was partly her fault as well. Even as nerve wracking as it was, she had decided to just let it be whatever it was going to be since they first started this all. She was scared it would push him away, give too much of herself away - she could admit that, if only to herself.

"Good plan," Harold nods and sips his coffee. Draco had obviously decided his slight suspicion of Harold wasn't worth continuing the argument with Lavender last night. Creepy grin or not, the guy didn't seem to hold much capability of being a spy.

"Later there's another house in a Muggle neighborhood; the address we found at the building with the rats. It's not close to any authorized Apparition points or wizard/Muggle lines. We're going to have to use Muggle transportation to get there."

They had made Portkeys for all the locations they had found before they left Grimmauld. Their inability to use magic unless it was absolutely necessary prevented them from making one for the new location. Justin had suggested stealing a car. Hermione had no idea what they would do.

"It looks like it's about an hour, maybe two away. An automobile?" Justin bent over to page through the notes of plans with an oddly silent Seamus.

"There looks to be a train system close to the first house we'll be going to. We'll pick up a city map when we arrive at the second location."

"Right. Do we have Muggle currency?" Lavender gave Draco a look that plainly said he was an idiot.

The room is silent, all eyes on Draco except for Seamus who continues to stare at the stack of papers. Draco is staring at the tiled floor, not in thought, but *waiting*. Waiting because he knew that *she* did, and he wasn't even saying it or *looking* at her. She had never seen him back down from anything, so what was he doing it from now? Her reaction after a night of thinking about what happened? Her reaction last night? Was he angry or just giving her time? Because she didn't need it and she didn't want it.

Perhaps he had decided to call the whole thing off. Maybe he was done, and he was sick of her keeping him some dark nasty secret, and he was done. She wanted to throw something at his head, maybe. Just to knock whatever he was thinking out of his mouth.

She chokes a little when she breathes in, and they all look at her except for him. "I do."

Day: 1444; Hour: 18

"That place was cleaned out months ago. Waste. Of. Time. *Again*." Seamus sounds completely furious, and his overreaction does nothing to help the desperation welling up inside of her.

"Ron is here somewhere. They all are, we just have to--" Hermione cuts herself off

sharply at the look of raw fury Seamus gives her before practically marching on ahead of her.

Hermione's heart jumps and the hairs rise at the nape of her neck. She has seen Seamus angry more times than any other emotion, but she had never actually *feared* him like that moment. It makes her slow her pace enough for Justin to walk right into her.

Justin mutters a quick apology and squeezes the top of her arms before coming up alongside her. "We're not giving up hope, Hermione. It's just frustrating."

"I know."

"How far is the train station from here?"

"Thirty minute walk about." Harold checks his watch twice in the amount of time it takes for him to say it.

"Great."

Day: 1444; Hour: 19

He doesn't say anything, just grabs her arm and drags her past him. At least it was some normal manhandling and not a, 'Hermione, I would like for you to please sit with the harmless looking female rather than the criminal looking bloke in the only available seats, so please come forward.' She almost expected it with the alternate universe she had stepped into. *This* Draco hadn't even glared at her once all day, even when she purposely criticized his plan.

So she sat and stared as the back of his head, watching him glare at the burly man next to him as he sized him up. She wondered if other people could sense the danger around Draco, or if was something confined to their world and reputation. By the way the man decided to ignore Draco after, she was guessing he carried at least as much danger-vibe as the man who looked like he was recently paroled from the penitentiary. The deep cuts along his jaw and the fact that he looked as if he hadn't slept in three years added to it drastically.

"Draco," there wasn't much escape from her direct line of questioning, and he knew that by now judging by the increased tenseness to his shoulders, "can I see the map?"

She had been trying to find a way to show him that she was okay with people

knowing about them - that she wasn't ashamed to be with him, or wanted to stop being with him. She wanted to show him in a way that got to the point but didn't seem too desperate, like it meant a lot, or that she was only doing it because she felt bad. She wanted to know if he was still okay with all of it. Hermione knew this couldn't be accomplished through asking for a map, but she needed some *interaction*.

At least when he was angry she usually knew how to handle him. She didn't even know what this was, and she was so frustrated she wanted to whack him over the head with said map.

He handed it to her silently, and it takes her a moment. "This is for the place we just left."

"No shit," *finally, finally.*

"Oh," because she realized that they had established hours ago that they would get the other map when they got into the town. "Why did you even give it to me then?"

"Because you asked for the map, and that happens to be the map." He is speaking to her like a child, but just this once, she'll take it.

No, she won't, so she smacks the back of his head with the rolled paper. The temptation had proved too great. He turns quickly and glares at her, and she almost smiles before he grabs her wrist and squeezes uncomfortably.

"Hit me again," he warns and yanks the map from her hand.

He was angry then, on top of whatever confusing emotion was on his face when he purposely ignored her. It took ten minutes before she thought it might be from her reaction last night, when she realized she might be a little angry too if he reacted like the world was falling apart because someone found out he was shagging her.

Draco was still a prideful man. Despite the lack of an actual relationship, there was probably no one else he was more vulnerable with. It had been bad enough when she was so over cautious about keeping them a secret because of who he was. The only thing that could have made her reaction worse was if she had spoken the terrible excuses in her head and perhaps a crying jig.

She felt even worse than she had before.

Day: 1444; Hour: 22

She kept staring at him, and he noticed it judging by the exasperated looks he keeps sending her. She had seen him in Muggle society before, but it is strange to see him in the sharp lighting of a gas station, standing between a mechanic and a group of kids into the fashion statements of rap artists. She has to grab for the popcorn three times before she finally drags her eyes away from the sight over the shelf.

The group of teenagers glares at her when she passes them to stand with Draco. In the war Hermione has learned to differentiate the attitude of others. The cocky confidence that has no reason for it, the fear of not knowing what kind of fighter they made, the ugly blood thirst of those who had been overtaken by the fighter they became. Draco, like Harry and Lupin among others, had a quiet yet powerful confidence. The sort of confidence that came with knowing how to kill, and that you *could* kill, if you had to. It was dark and terrifying, yet controlled. Hermione, however, doesn't think she will ever lose her Holy-Do-Good visage, so when she glares back they just glare harder.

"Is the popcorn necessary?" His voice sounds dull; she hates it.

"Let's see if you're asking that later when you're stealing it again."

He looks down at her, her nose up in the air and her eyebrow arched to match his. She drops it when she notices that he is scrutinizing her expression, and she is reminded of the other night, the cough outside the door. She opens her mouth but she doesn't know what to say, just the feeling that she *should*, so she breathes in really deep and feels his exhale across her skin.

"Sir?"

Draco looks up at the woman behind the counter and moves forward, leaving Hermione to blink at the spot between his shoulder blades. "A town map."

The worker turns to grab one and she swears she can hear Draco mutter something that sounds too much like "fuck" for her to not become more confused. Whatever he had found in her expression didn't seem like it pleased him. It makes her nervous, like she might have failed a pop quiz even though she was always attentive in class.

He reaches behind him to grab the popcorn from her and it snaps her out of it, stepping up to the counter to pay for their items. Her shoulder presses against his

arm and neither one moves away.

Day: 1444; Hour: 22

The house sits in a row of houses not an arms length apart on a street across from another row of houses. They go through the back door, Draco standing back awkwardly with his unspoken for injured shoulder until Seamus and Harold ram theirs into the wood. They are halfway across the kitchen when a man appears naked in the doorway to the hall, and until he raises his wand, Hermione is sure they have the wrong house.

Justin kills him, his shoulders heaving forward with the effort. It is an overwhelming black coldness that rips so hard out of your gut the tissue feels raw and bound to scar; that is the Avada curse. Whenever she thinks of it, Hermione will live the rest of her life feeling nauseated, overtaken by the empty, and ice cold from the feeling that never ceases in its determination to be remembered.

Hermione doesn't look down as she jumps over him, because she had learned long ago that eyes with glazed death never left her either. It was a necessity to go into shutdown mode - no emotional response meant you got the job done, and it has taken Hermione several years to know that. She felt too much for everything for it not to be a lie if she said she could do it properly, but to hell if she didn't try.

Plan B splits them into pairs to move more quickly now that magic has been used. A green jet shoots down from the staircase, and far from their feet as Harold and Justin take to the right, Hermione with Draco to the left, and Seamus sends up his own Killing Curse with Lavender behind him up the staircase. Draco always put them in the same pairs, and though they didn't much discuss Plan B for this mission, they did it almost naturally.

The first door Hermione opens has her pausing long enough to have been killed four times over by the woman in front of her. The same expression stares back at her in the dim light of the bedroom: shock, fear, confusion, an insurmountable lack of certainty that had both their wands aimed and their mouths tightly shut.

An arm wraps around her shoulders from behind and she knows it is Draco from the feel of him, his forearm sliding up against her neck as he spins them quickly from the doorway. She jerks forward when she catches a glimpse of his wand, but he only shouts a *Stupify*. Which is good, because she would have never forgiven him. She would have never looked him in the face again, and she chokes out a breath because she knows that is the absolute truth.

"Portkey her," he barks gruffly into her ear and releases her, Hermione's shaky hand digging into her pocket as she rushes forward.

The woman stares blankly up at her, wand now frozen on the ceiling, and Hermione stares down at the protruding stomach that could only mean one thing. Death Eater or not, there wasn't an excuse in all the world Hermione could feed herself for killing a pregnant woman. It was somehow the last thing she expected to see on the other side of the door, and for a reason she couldn't comprehend; it was as if all the charms and spells she knew had left her. All she could think of was the Killing Curse and the sheer impossibility of performing it.

She hadn't frozen up like that in so long. Embarrassment proved distant when something hard collided with her temple, another to her shoulder, another flying just a breath from her face. She snaps her head up just as the woman disappears beneath her, finding the wild, crazed eyes of a sobbing child.

"Shit," Hermione breathes.

"You- What did you do to my mum?" The little boy screams this so hard that the tendons pop out on his neck and his face immediately shines bright red.

He reaches for a vase, and it shatters against her shoulder. "Your mum is fine! She's okay, she's--"

He screams again, animalistic, raw and desperate, and in a way that no five year-old child should ever sound. He runs at her and she stays kneeling, bracing herself for the little ball of fury, and grabs him by the shoulders. His tiny fists smack soundly into her face, and she drops a hand into her pocket for another portkey.

"She's okay! I promise! I just put her in a safe place so she-- I'm going to send you to your mum, okay? I'm going--"

She wondered if this is what all children would do. If this is how they reacted when they found out about the death of their parents. If the people she had killed had children who would look at her with those same pain-ridden accusing eyes, and if she would ever forget this. She realizes that she's shaking, a suspicious knot in her chest, and she feels the sudden, almost undeniable urge to hug him.

His nails are dragging lines of skin off her arms, her blood packed under his fingernails, and she yanks a ribbon from the bag in her pocket. "I'm very sorry," she whispers, and she's crying and ridiculous.

It is an effort to tie the ribbon around his wrist, his other hand smacking into the side of her face as he sobs, but she moves quickly before the Portkey takes her as well. He's gone two seconds later, leaving her kneeling on the floor of an empty bedroom, blood covering her arms and her face full of tears. Hermione has never done well with the victims of war, the innocent bystanders who looked at her to help them or as a vessel for their revenge. The fallout of war extended far beyond the spell line of a Killing Curse. Both worlds they touched were forced to devastation. She wonders if any of them could reclaim their lives again, and if she would ever stop feeling guilty for so much.

She enters the hall, still shaking, as Draco emerges from a door further down. His face is blank, eyes calculating and intense in the look that screams survival instinct. They all wore it well in a battle, an instinctual expression no one wanted to discover about themselves. It's gone a second later, and something close to panic breaks like a wave across his features.

"What the *fuck*," and she remembers her bloody arms and the tears she didn't wipe away. There is also something wet and sticky sliding down her shoulder and back, and she knows she must look a lot worse than what it is.

"Is it clear?" She manages to keep her voice even, but it comes out weak. The rooms are cleared, judging by the sole purpose of his march toward her.

"Spell?"

He grabs the back of her neck and pulls her forward, her forehead hitting his chest as he leans over to get a better look at her back. This is familiar, and comforting in a way she can't understand, waking her from the abyss of thoughts too heavy for battle.

"He thought I killed his mum. He threw some stuff at me. I'm fine, let's--" She cut herself off with a scream as pain erupted from her shoulder blade. He drops the piece of glass to the floor.

"I'm not good with healing charms," he bit, and she doesn't know if he is angry with her or himself for admitting this.

"Draco, what the hell! You don't just..." Hermione trails off and bites her lips hard, pain roaring up again as the skin stretches at her wound.

"Tha--" Both their heads snap toward the ceiling as a loud crash sounded above them, then Lavender's voice screaming.

They both take for the stairs, Harold already at the top before turning a corner sharply. Justin takes the steps two at a time, his hair and face wild. "Cleared for us."

Justin and Draco both trip over the body lying just around the corner, and Hermione makes to vault it before something has her turning back around. Awareness, that sense honed in war, on that line of life and death.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" Hermione screams before she can even think about it, her heart stopping and then exploding with beats as that dark feeling overwhelmed her.

Draco breathes out hard enough to move the hair at the back of her neck. She thinks this might be for two reasons: he had forgotten his usual thoroughness and at least two of them (including him) could have just died, and the house had suddenly been set on fire. Flames were eating their way across the walls, ceiling, and down the staircase. The woman, revealed after the man fell, screams in fury and shoots a jet of fire at them before turning the corner behind her.

Someone counters the flame as Hermione raises her arms in front of her face in a move that her father used to laugh at during pillow fights when she was a child (*oh, anything but the pretty face, huh? Anything but that!*). Draco's shoulder impacts with the back of hers and makes them both grunt in pain. The wall catches her and she bounces off it, sprinting to follow after the long-legged run of the blond.

"We have to get out of here!" Lavender yells behind her, grabs her elbow, but Hermione punches her arm forward and continues.

Draco reels back from the corner just in time to miss a green jet. It disappears into the flames along the wall, a cloud of green exploding out into the air. "Draco, she has the sight advantage, there's no way--"

"Guys, let's *go*!" Justin yells.

Draco moves to turn the corner again and Hermione grabs his shoulders, throwing her weight back on her heels. A scream tears its way out of her as the skin rips at her wound, but the impact of the floor and Draco's sudden weight forces her to be silent. He turns over quickly but his shoulder is moving in a strange way that tells her she has injured him as much as herself.

"What the fuck are you doing?" It's the voice that always ignites fear at her gut, the voice so full of rage it *scrapes* its way out of his throat and along his tongue.

"Do you have a death wish?" Hermione barks back, because she does not fear

Draco Malfoy, not really.

"Obviously, the entire staircase is on fire. We have to get out of here now." Harold is in blind panic mode, the heat in the house sweltering, and he's already soaking through his shirt.

"Draco, she's planning on burning this whole house down with her in it--" He yanks her up by her shirt, the cloth tearing at the collar.

She closes her eyes against the pain, and his sweat-soaked hand slides through the blood on her arm as he hauls her up the rest of the way. She digs her nails back into him, angry, but it's nothing compared to the look on his face as he brings it closer to hers.

"*Exactly*! If she's willing to burn herself alive, she's got information that-- *Fuck*!" Regret, anger. He knows it is too late, and there was no hope for it anyway.

He pushes her forward and he follows her down the stairs, Justin breathing relief as he follows. She throws cooling charms at the flames, which do not put them out but sway them to the side enough to make it to the exit. Harold, Lavender, and Seamus stand in the street as they barge through the front door. Hermione can hear the *pop-pop-pop*ping of her popcorn on the back porch between the sounds of groaning wood and growing fire.

"Hermione--" Lavender starts

"I'm fine."

"You pull that shit again, you won't be."

"Draco? Get over yourself," Hermione barks, in too much pain and because of him to care.

"Myself? I--" He's back to rage.

"The staircase to the attic was covered in flames, and that crazy woman was standing at the top of it with a death wish, waiting to Avada you as soon as you turned the corner! Talk about a Gryffindor Suicide Mission, Draco! There was no *way* you were getting up there alive. You're going to give your life up, for what? A chance in hell?" She didn't know just how furious she was about it until she started yelling at him.

Draco is glaring down at her, but his mouth is tightly shut into a thin line, and she knows she won this one. Finally. A light turns on across the street and they see, belatedly, that the lights are turning on all down the block. Justin turns his wide, blinking eyes away from her and up the block, Seamus muttering a stream of curses.

"The Ministry and the neighbors are on their way," Lavender points out, but they're already sprinting down the block, and Hermione runs out her anger.

Day: 1445; Hour: 5

They hide in the woods for five hours. Draco has said nothing to her besides "Sit," when he wadded up her coat and shoved it between her and a tree, pulling her back to catch the cloth between her shoulder and bark. Healing charms were out of the question now, and the only thing they could do was stopping the blood flow. He glared at her when he noticed the wound had reopened, though she didn't know if it was because she had tore it or because of how she did.

And the never-ending guessing game of Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger raged on.

The most excitement in the afterglow of the battle came as soon as they made it through the tree line and Justin finally answered their questions about why they weren't Portkeying out. Draco looked as if a heart attack was about to hit at any moment as soon as Justin admitted he had left the bag in the house. They were left with Portkeys to the Ministry and St. Mungo's, and the anger lasted the entire five hours.

Hermione tried to sleep but her adrenaline took too long to leave, and every time she closed her eyes she saw the eyes of the little boy staring back at her. She also couldn't calm her thoughts that were mad with need to tear themselves down dark avenues. The little boy, the naked man in the hall no older than seventeen, the lingering cold of the Killing Curse, the pregnant woman, the possibility of Draco's death if she had been a second too late, if he hadn't moved a second soon enough. One would think she would have gotten used to the possibility of death. She didn't think anyone ever could.

It is hitting daylight when they find their way out of the wilderness. Lavender and Justin are shaking with the cold, Harold is well rested and back to grinning, Seamus doesn't speak a word as he walks ahead of them. Draco looks as tired as she feels, and she can only stare longingly at the breakfast layout when they walk into the hotel.

"Two bedrooms, double queen beds, please." Hermione's voice comes out too raspy, and the man behind the counter stares too long at her weary face and Draco's coat that hangs off of her.

She wonders what his reaction would be if she told him that she just hid out in the woods for hours on end after a battle where she killed someone with a Killing Curse from this stick-looking thing. That she was attacked by objects and a little boy, and was covered in blood, so that tall, imposing blond behind her gave her his coat. She wonders what he would do if she said it was for his life too. For his world too. And he would never have any idea.

"Been traveling?" The man smiles, typing into his computer, and she can practically *feel* Draco bite his tongue.

"Yeah. We fell asleep on our train and missed our stop." Hermione returned the smile and Draco sends her a harsh look. She doesn't know why until the man speaks again and she's floundering, remembering *why* Draco thinks she should give up the art of lying. Forever.

"Where were you headed?"

She doesn't know why she bothered saying that in the first place. She overdid it when she was nervous. The man's eyes were slowly drawing down from his curiosity and into suspicion.

"A friend's wedding," Draco lied smoothly.

"Oh, I hope you didn't miss it."

"We did." Well, at least saying they missed it could excuse the harshness and impatience in Draco's tone.

"Well..," the man trails off, giving Draco's glare a cautious look. "We don't normally let guests check in for a couple hours, but we have rooms open now."

"Great."

"Credit card?" Draco raises an eyebrow at the question, obviously having no idea what that even was, and slides the money across the counter. "Oh, alright. Get you set up here...201 and 317."

"Thank you," Hermione smiles, taking the key envelopes from the counter and

following behind Harold and Justin to the elevator.

"We could use the stairs," Harold tries.

"Please. After last night I'm claiming lazy, and I don't care," Lavender muttered, pushing her face into his shoulder.

Hermione subconsciously cleared her throat and blinks at Draco's shoes as the elevator beeped the second floor. All of them exited except for Seamus and Harold, who stood in the path of the door to keep it open. "Who is sleeping where?"

"I think we need to discuss another matter first," Draco drawls, not bothering to look back at them as he walked down the hall.

"I really am sorry." Justin already knows what it's pertaining to, his bottom lip gnawed between his teeth and his head down.

"Mistakes happen." Hermione reaches over to squeeze his arm, speaking quickly before anyone else can tell him different.

"It's a costly one." She agreed - there wasn't much left of the savings she had from that summer before the war. God, it was like the memories of another life.

"No one died, we'll figure it out."

Hermione slid the key in and threw open the door, ignoring the desire to crawl her way to the nearest bed. Discussion, shower, bed, food. Draco crossed the room to the window to shut the curtains, Lavender and Harold took a seat on the bed and Seamus kept to the door like he was waiting for an escape.

"I have to use the bathroom..." Justin started.

"We don't need you for this." Harold smiled, waving him off.

"Why? He lost them, he should be the one going back!" Lavender, even tired, still had an annoying shriek when she was passionate about something.

"Going back?" Hermione shakes her head, as if the question itself wasn't enough to prove she was lost.

"Weren't you listening in the woods? One of us is going to have to Portkey to St. Mungo's. We need Porkeys to the safe house again, medical supplies, more food..."

Lavender trails off, looking over at Draco. "How are they supposed to get back here?"

"The same way we did."

"We're going to be here forever!" Lavender throws up her hands.

Hermione gets nervous for a moment before common sense sets in. They didn't have enough money to spend more than three days here, but most of all, she didn't want to wait for days before they were out searching again. Hermione didn't even like to spend more than five hours sleeping. If she was functional, she wanted to be out searching for Ron. She had to be, even.

"A day to get everything, a couple hours to get here. It's a day and a half, bint, calm the exaggerations."

"Well, before you continue insulting my girlfriend," this is the first time Hermione has heard Harold stand up for anything, "I'm volunteering to go back."

"What? Baby, you can't go, what if they catch you--"

The two began whispering to each other in little purrs that had the rest of the room awkward. Justin flung open the door unaware, and Seamus smacks it away from him so hard it whacks off of Justin's shoulder. Seamus looks toward the far wall as everyone looks toward him.

"I'll go."

"No, Harold's going to go," Lavender nods and smiles at her boyfriend.

"If you want to go, Finnigan, by all means. But we need someone who is going to come back."

Hermione gives Draco a curious look, and when she looks to Seamus she is surprised to find his glare leveled on her and not the blond. "I don't turn traitor on my friends, Malfoy."

There was a fast silence in the room, and Hermione can't help but think everyone is in on something that she doesn't have a clue about. She knew the redhead had been in a silent rage all day and night, and now she has the feeling everyone knew why but her. Then, it hits her, just after Lavender mutters a curse behind her and right before Justin speaks.

"Seamus, why don't we go take a walk, mate?"

"I'm not taking a fucking walk. I just walked half the night for no reason--"

"The more places we don't find anyone at, the more we scratch off the list--" Hermione tries to pretend that this can be a normal tantrum, but the tension is thick and her heart is pounding.

Seamus knew. He knew about her and Draco, and she is guessing that it was from Lavender who has now stood and is busy sending her apologetic looks. Hermione is breathing a little too fast and even Harold has stopped smiling. "Shut the fuck up."

"Seamus--" she tries, weakly.

"You know, Ron could be dead right now. Dead. And you're busy fucking *Malfoy*, that *prick* he hates, while he could be getting tortured to *death* by Malfoy's fucking *buddies*."

"Ron is *not* dead," Hermione attempts to make this come out angry, but it's hoarse and the words crack broken on her teeth. "He is not! And what I do is none of your business, Seamus Finnigan! Don't you dare judge me, you have no right--"

"Isn't he the one who--"

"Don't even try to talk to me about his past prejudice, not after all he's done, and not after you *stand there*, refusing to look beyond the past and--"

"You're a traitor, Hermione! You're shagging *Draco Malfoy*

"A *member* of the *Order*, a man - a *good man* -- who is on *our*

"Does it get you off, Hermione? Do--"

"I would watch what you say next, Finnigan." She didn't realize she was on the edge of hyperventilating until she hears his voice through it, closer now.

"*Fuck you*. Do you like shagging some Death Eater spawn? The son of the man who tried to kill you? Does he call you Mudblood when--"

"Seamus!" Lavender and Justin in unison, Hermione's reach for her wand, the fast footfalls of Draco behind her.

"--his little Mudblood whor--" Seamus cut his own self off, his hand coming up, but Draco is quicker, the crack of bone meeting bone resounding through the room.

Hermione stares in a sort of shock as Seamus rights himself against the wall and tackles Draco, his fingers clenching into Draco's bad shoulder and his fist colliding with his face. Draco grabs his wrist and twists it sharply, Hermione's stomach rolling as another crack fills the room. Seamus cries out and his fist comes away with Draco's blood on his knuckles, slamming it home again.

Justin grabs Seamus by the shoulders just as Draco lands another punch to the redhead's face. Seamus yells something but it is trapped behind the blood that sprays from his mouth. Justin manages to lift Seamus enough to get an elbow to the stomach, and Draco jumps to his feet. By the time Harold has a grip on the blond, Draco's fingers are vices around Seamus's throat, the redhead's back to the wall and his feet off the ground. Draco leans in, mouth open to speak, but Harold wrenches him back and Seamus's foot connects with nothing but air.

Lavender stands between the two, arms out, tears on her face. "*Stop!*"

Hermione gasps an inhale, edging out the black dots with dizziness, and finds she had been holding her breath. She stands completely still save the shaking of her hands, and if she is crying too she wipes it away before anyone can see to prove it.

That hurt. It hurt more than she had thought it would. A Death Eater spawn? Yes, once. Son of the man who had tried to kill her? Yes. But that son is nothing like that man, and Hermione knows this with a fierceness that sometimes startles her. Seamus had it wrong, but that wasn't what bothered her. It was the quickness in which he turned on her.

"You motherfucker," Seamus seethed.

"You went too far, Finnigan. I believe you shou--"

"One day, I'm going to kill you. Out on the field, when the battle is thick. My face is going to be the last thing you see," Seamus says calmly, as if he had thought about it a long time and it brought him peace. It probably did. It made her physically sick.

"You can bet your life that will never happen," Draco growled, wiping the blood

from his face.

"You're slow, Malfoy. Took you long enough to get over here." Seamus blows out a laugh and Hermione's eyes find the side of Draco's face. "You put on a good show, but I see right through you. Was it the Mudblood that got you? Too close to the--"

"Stop. Stop it. Right. Now," Lavender seethes in a quiet way that Hermione has never heard from her.

It looks like it's physically painful for him to do so, but he does. "I'm going to St. Mungo's. Prick ca--"

He stops when Hermione hurls the bag of St. Mungo's Portkeys to his feet. Draco and Lavender step back as some of them skitter across the floor, not wanting to be sent to St. Mungo's on accident. Seamus pauses, clenches his jaw, and bends to pick one up. He glares at Draco until he disappears.

"Should I go now? Make sure he doesn't tell anyone where we are or...or are we going to leave...?"

"He won't tell anyone. He wouldn't risk ending the mission, no matter how angry he is," Justin mutters and takes a washcloth, using it to throw the Portkeys back in the bag.

Draco Malfoy had just defended her. Had just taken several punches to the face, a bloody nose and mouth, and defended her. What does someone do after something like that? Because all she could feel was the rapid beat of her heart and sort of dizzy as she stares over at him. That had to mean something. That had to mean more than just guilt for being a big part of the reason she was put in such situations with her friends. Didn't it?

Draco walks slowly to the bathroom, kicking the door shut behind him. It doesn't close all the way and Hermione stares at the gap as Lavender grabs her elbow. "I'm so sorry. I thought he knew already, and that was part of the reason he hated Malfoy so much, you know? I brought it up in like a...a nonchalant sort of way yesterday, like, 'oh, isn't it silly how Hermione was worried about having her friends know'. And...and I was just hoping he wouldn't say anything instead of me having to tell you I screwed up."

"It's fine," her voice is distant, and Lavender looks even more worried. "I'm going to wash up."

"Oh. Oh, alright."

Hermione shrugged off Draco's coat, throwing it on the floor. It would have to be washed to get her blood out of it. Maybe he would throw it out - blood never really came out. They all looked away when she walked to the bathroom, and she makes sure the door is completely shut on their silence. She stares at the tile for four seconds before she has the nerve to look up at him.

"Need help?"

He meets her eyes in the mirror, his hand pausing before he squeezes the red water out of it. "I'm fully capable."

She doesn't know what to say to that that isn't awkward, so she grabs another washcloth and turns the tap in the bath on. She thinks of several things: taking a shower, but needing another excuse to stay there; stripping naked and getting into the bath for distraction sake; what she can say to get him to talk; stop acting like a stupid little girl and just snog him in thanks.

"Can you help me?"

He makes a sound like amusement, and she is surprised to find the twitch of his lips when she turns around. "That is an impossible request."

Oh. Oh, because this is what he always did. If he didn't grow angry than he made fun of her whenever he was feeling vulnerable about something. He *had* to go back to the familiar, or it just threw everything off.

"Haha," but it cracked too much to go along with the teasing. She hurried along before he turned to serious, which meant angry, which meant Very Hard to Deal With. "My back."

She stood strange for a moment before she yanks her shirt over her head, grimacing at the pull on her shoulder. She is happy to note Draco's full attention once her head has cleared the material. She pretends it's not excitement rolling at the bottom of her stomach. Seamus's reaction hurt, but was expected. Draco's reaction was unexpected, and made her feel things she absolutely refused to name and admit to.

"Not with that," she points to the bloody washcloth he's squeezing out in the sink, and her voice brings his eyes back up to her face where she's already blushing from the attention.

"I don't have any diseases."

"I know. Obviously. But it's…unsanitary."

He raises an eyebrow at her and smirks. "Are you saying I have dirty blood?"

She purses her lips and chucks her washcloth at him, but it's dry and falls to the floor before it even touches him. He breathes a laugh, and she thinks how she can hardly keep up with his mood swings lately. Though, she had defended him to Seamus - perhaps that proved to him where she stood on the matter. And he had defended her to Seamus, so maybe they were both a little more out in the open now, to each other as well. Their relationship was so confusing. He was so confusing. If she were honest with herself, it was one of the good points, for her. She was weird like that - he told her so himself.

"I was just getting the water out." He grabs another clean one and she nods, because she hates soggy washcloths too. "Are you taking a bath or just trying to suffocate yourself by way of heat?"

"Oh." She glances over her shoulder, and then back to him, blushing already. "Are you taking a bath?"

He raises an eyebrow, and she distracts herself by picking the washcloth off the floor. She doesn't know if she'll ever stop being shy around him in some ways, but she does know that this, whatever they are, forces both of them to go out on a limb sometimes to keep it going. By the time she stands, he's already pulling his shirt over his head.

She hisses in through her teeth at the sight of his shoulder, blue, purple, and harsh. "We need those medical supplies ASAP."

He shrugs one shoulder, the good one, and looks down to unbutton his pants. "How old was the child?"

"What child?" She's easily distracted by him, and he knows this because he smiles at the floor.

"The one who made ribbons of your arms."

It was an exaggeration. She had five claw marks on one, seven on the other. "I put him at five."

"Packs a punch then."

Her eyes were greedy on the patch of skin and hair his undone button exposed, though she tried to act nonchalant about it as she undid her own pants. She loved to see him naked - she could admit that to herself now. His fingers were cold, bringing her face up as they brushed along the swollen skin of her jaw.

"Bruise?" She whispers this, and he agrees with the sound because he lowers his voice as well.

"Indeed."

She reaches up with her own hand, her fingers hot against the coolness of his lips, cheekbone, jaw, the line of his nose. She thought it might close him down if she said something like "thank you", so she would show him instead. They always spoke through actions - words strained.

"I should wash the blood and stuff off first, so the water..." she trails off for a moment as he jerks her pants and knickers past her hips, but his eyes don't leave hers, giving her reason to keep talking, "...doesn't get all dirty and gross."

He bends to pull her clothes off the rest of the way, and she toes her socks off as he stands. "That's the thing about baths, Granger. The water always gets dirty and gross."

"It's relaxing, though."

"I don't disagree. Get in."

He hands her a washcloth and she awkwardly steps into the tub, sitting on the edge to wipe the blood off her arms. She hisses and grimaces under the heat of the water and the drag of the cloth, understanding why Draco's face and hands were cold. She hears the zip of his pants behind her and rustle of clothing, thinking briefly of her friends on the other side of the door, but doesn't care. This was the other part of proving that to him.

His hand appears, taking the cloth out of her hand and he steps into the tub. She watches him sit; sliding until his back hits the end. He looks at her, waiting, expectant, and she lets her eyes slide up the length of him before taking her seat between his legs. He grips her hips, pulling her back until she is nestled against him, his thighs at her hips, a growing hardness at her back, his hands moving to her shoulders.

"This is going to hurt."

"I know."

"I'm not going to go easy like Brown would, I'm going to get it cleaned."

"I know."

She toughs it out, but the way her fingers dig into his legs is rather telling. Red tinted water ebbs past their legs, and he hands the cloth to her occasionally to wash it out in the tap before she hands it back. When she does so, he runs his fingertips down the ridges of her spine and around the swelling of her shoulder.

She thinks she should find a heavy significance in this, but it doesn't hit her like it would have a year ago, even. Her blood was just blood to him - or maybe her blood was *her blood* to him, blood he had touched a dozen times, the blood of his lover, the blood of his friend. Perhaps she might stagger under the comparison from Hogwarts to this second, but there were years and years between those moments and this somehow made sense. As if there were no other roads this could have taken.

"Done."

She cleans the cloth out once more, waiting for the last of the dirty water to drain. She tosses the cloth toward the sink and misses, hitting the button on the tap to fill the tub. She isn't sure what to say so she traces along the bumps of his kneecaps and lets him pull her back against his chest.

"You're not going to breakdown are you?"

"No," Hermione shakes her head, taking in the caution of his fingers on her thighs. "I'm saving that until after the war."

"More right good times to follow then."

"What do you want to do?"

"What?"

"After the war," she explains.

"I don't think that far ahead."

"Pessimistic."

"Lazy."

"Bull."

She can feel him smirk against the side of her neck, but it leaves his lips when he kisses her up to her jaw. His hands - because he knows by now that he needs both - gather her hair up to the top of her head, using it to turn her face toward him. He kisses her slowly and she remembers his busted lip, kissing him back softly in return. She flicks her tongue out, along the cut, and this might be too affectionate for him because he kisses her harder.

Half her hair falls as he runs a hand down her neck and side, around her waist, and back up her stomach to lift the weight of her breast in his palm. She inhales heavily through her nose and turns in clumsy jolts to face him. His eyes are dark when she meets them and he is beautiful; his hands gripping her bum and sloshing her forward and against him.

She presses her hands into his stomach and pushes them up his chest, feeling his skin move with her palms as she kisses him again. His lip must have torn a little because she can taste the faint metallic of his blood in her mouth, and she should probably think it's weird, but she doesn't. He can probably taste it too, his tongue dancing across hers, and when she pushes her hips he groans into her mouth.

"Tap," he mumbles, and she sucks on his tongue as he rocks into her.

"What?" she asks after a moment, because she doesn't really care what he's saying.

He doesn't seem to either, his hand traveling down her stomach, his fingers questing. "Water."

"Uh huh," she has no idea what he's talking about.

He jerks hard when she wraps her fingers around the hardness between their stomachs, and he tears his mouth from hers to put it to her neck. "Fuck it," he groans, and presses open-mouthed kisses to her skin, his tongue swirling an instinctual alphabet of half-formed thoughts.

His head forces her to arch back and she has to grab his arms for support, his kisses circling her breasts. It isn't until then that she realizes her scalp is touching

water. She blinks at the ceiling, trying to find rational thought through the haze and his-- she moans when his mouth closes over her nipple, clutching his head harder. His hand slides further up her back as he begins to kneel, lifting his head to look at her in that way that makes her breathing stop.

"Wait, wait…tap, water." She motions with her hand and reluctantly pulls away from him, turning to face the tap. The motion sends another wave of water to the bathroom floor, and she has just enough time to turn off the water before he's grabbing her hips.

More water hits the tiles as he pulls her back and over him, one hand digging into her hip and the other leaving to guide himself in. He breathes hot in the space between her shoulder blades, his breath rolling moisture across her skin. His lips find the back of her ear and they both moan when she sinks down onto him.

"Fuck, Hermione." She feels the words in the mouth against her ear, in the chest against her back, the arm anchored around her, the shoulders pulled up against the back of hers.

She begins moving faster, water sloshing over the edge each time. She moves her hand down, entwining her fingers with the ones on her hip, and she doesn't care if it seems too personal. He doesn't either, his other hand sliding up her stomach and to her breasts, her fingers clutching the edge of the tub so hard they almost hurt.

"Draco," she whispers, moans, and lets her head drop back onto his shoulder - the good one, she hopes.

He shrugs it and she opens her eyes, moaning loudly as he thrusts up hard, and her fingers squeeze his under the water. She lifts her head and turns it enough to look at him and he hunches forward, kissing her awkward-positioned and wonderful.

There were several reasons to defend Draco Malfoy. This is certainly one of them.

Twenty-Three

Day: 1445; Hour: 16

Harold leaves at dusk, his cheeks stained with Lavender's kisses and a note to Harry crinkling in his palm.

Day: 1446; Hour: 8

"Did you ask him to come back?" Draco asks this like it's painful letting curiosity rule his tongue.

"Harold?"

"Yes, the one who obviously knows he is to come back." Dry sarcasm -- it's possibly his favorite.

Hermione has to think about it for a moment because she's eating a croissant that could never taste like her gran's, but still reminds her of the woman anyway. And home, and spring mornings, and the smell of baking that lingered in the kitchen even after they had all went to bed.

"I told Harry what we were doing. I told him I didn't ask because I wanted him to heal properly."

"An apology letter--"

"No. I didn't say I was sorry."

Draco pauses in chewing, but doesn't take his eyes off the television. She knows he's not paying attention to what's on the screen anyway--he doesn't understand cartoons, and he has been staring at the yellow sponge on the screen with an incredulous look for the past five minutes.

"Would you care?" Because her tongue has always been ruled by curiosity.

"It's not of my concern if you feel the need to apologize to Potter."

"I meant if I had asked him to come back with Harold."

His jaw clenches, and he looks down to place his toast on the side table, no longer hungry from the apple that preceded it or from their conversation. "It's your mission, Granger."

He is being careful with the conversation and Hermione finds it odd, and annoying because he never is, not with her. He looks annoyed, probably with himself for bringing it up, and Hermione realizes that he's probably quite done arguing about Harry with her.

"I just didn't know how badly you might hate him."

"I don't hate Potter. I simply don't care about him or anything he does."

"He thinks you hate him."

And this is really the only reason she kept going. She has been trying to find a way to bring up Lucius, and how Draco felt about the whole thing without being obvious that she wanted to pry into his feelings. It was just that she thinks he might need her to talk about something like that, and she knows he would never bring it up on his own. She doesn't know if she can be the sort of person that can listen to anything about Lucius Malfoy from a son who might have loved him, but she would like to try... for him.

Draco can see through her though, like he always does, but she only has herself to blame for letting him know her so well. He gives her that warning look, his face pulled tight, lips thinned, his jaw clenching. It had taken her several harsh, long blown-out fights before she recognized the look for what it was. She used to just take the intensity in his eyes as meaning she had his full attention. She learned quickly enough.

She lets the silence weigh them down, even after he turns his attention back to the tv. They are both dressed in robes, as well as Lavender and Justin who had retired to their room a floor above them. Justin had found it hilarious as they all lounged about the room eating strawberries for breakfast and waiting for the hotel laundry service to be finished with their clothes. Lavender found it more hilarious when Justin remembered the small bag of Portkeys he had left in his pocket and went flying downstairs and through the hotel lobby dressed in only his robe, yelling after the maid to give him back his pants.

"Tell me about your family?" she asks, fairly certain a demand for this would do worse damage than a request.

He still looks at her like she's lost her mind. "No."

"I've told you all about my family." From her parents to her crazy uncle who liked to line his walls with stuffed birds, and go grocery shopping through his neighbor's trashcans.

"I believe you owe *me* for that rather than the other way around."

"Come on, what's your favorite memory of childhood?" She is walking across skyscrapers on a telephone cord, she knows.

"Breaking Potter's nose."

"Draco." Silence. "What about family traditions? Sweet sixteen? Favorite place in the hou--"

"Why the fuck do you want to know about my family?" He is looking quite vicious, and she had been hoping she would ask something he wanted to answer before it came to this.

She shrugs, giving a very Hermione-like answer. "Because I don't know anything about it."

"Haven't you learned by now that there are some things that aren't any of your business to know?"

She closes her mouth tight enough for her jaw to ache and looks down at her fiddling hands. "I know all about Harry and Ron's families -- if you could even call Harry's family a 'family'. Those people--"

"Yes, I'm sure you all exchanged family stories over tea in the Gryffindor common room while Potter cried on your shoulder and Weasley drooled all over your--"

"You don't have to be so defensive. I'm not attacking you, there's no reason to attack-"

"Drop the subject Granger, or I'll show you a lesson on what defensive truly is." That vein on his forehead started making an appearance.

"Fine," he kept staring at her, perhaps because he knew the silence wasn't going to last, "I just want you to know that if you would like to ever talk about anything at all, I will listen if only for the sake of being curious."

It seemed efficiently cool and distanced from the sticky pile of things the world called "feelings", but Draco still lurches out of bed and she still cringes when his plate of toast shatters against the far wall. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure that echoes my thoughts on the matter a--" Her nose is in the air, and she knows he hates that, but it's too much of a habit to stop.

"You always *push*! You can't accept when some things are *off fucking limits*, or I just don't want to talk about it! Like you're entitled to know everything about me--you're not. You're. Not."

"Dra--"

"You might like to go on and on about your feelings, but--"

"I do not go on--"

"I don't need you, Granger. I am not your pity case, I am--"

"I have never looked at you like a pity case, Malfoy!" She is on her feet now too, finger shoved in his chest and he grabs it, squeezes hard enough for it to be pin and needles when he shoves it back and releases.

"My father never saw you as more than a Mudblood, worthy of death only because you were so unworthy of life. Do you really want to hear about my summer holidays, or how he taught me to fly a broom, or how I couldn't kill the man you only shared mutual hatred for? How your brave, wonderful, heroic Harry came in and *saved* the day. *Again*. What--"

"This has nothing to do with Harry, and nothing to do with how I felt about your father."

"--and you--"

"It has everything to do with you, Draco! And I'm sorry that you're so scared of how you feel about things, but I'm not sorry I offered you to talk to me about it. Your father is dead and no matter…" She trails off, jerking back so quickly she finds herself seated on the bed. His hand hovers in air, pulled back from whatever instinctual action had caused it to snap toward her.

He is breathing heavily, his hand smacking dully against his leg, his voice rasping. "My father was dead the moment the manor doors closed behind Pansy. Perhaps

even before that. I cared for my father, once. My memories are mine to keep, and not yours to twist. You don't need to understand this. I don't need you to."

"I wouldn't--"

"Granger, I--"

His fist is clenching again, and she lets it all go, quickly. "Okay."

She is debating an apology for all of five seconds until he walks out the door. Lavender arrives fifteen minutes later with a pillow and extra bar of soap, not saying anything to the frazzled girl across the room, opting to curl up under the blankets of the other bed and laugh at the cartoons instead.

Day: 1447; Hour: 6

"Shouldn't he be back by now?" Justin asks and then seems to regret it as the worry deepens on Lavender's forehead.

"If he's not back by tonight we should all go back." Lavender looks at the clock again and Hermione thinks she should just take a seat and stare at it for as often as she glances. "We don't have enough money to stay another night, right?"

"No. We have to check out in two hours."

"So, we have to go back, right? Maybe we should go now and--"

"We're not going now," Draco mutters, his eyes out the window.

Lavender gives Hermione the dirty look for Draco's attitude. Lavender had come down that morning from a visit to the other room, determined to give Hermione a speech on how to keep a man happy before Hermione threatened to hex her into the psychiatric ward. The other woman had settled on muttering about how they all had to deal with Hermione pissing him off and how it wasn't *fair*, while Hermione alternated between glaring and feeling bad.

"So what should we do?" Her lame attempt to talk to him like it was all normal.

"We don't have Portkeys to the safe house, we don't have money for a place to stay, or to even eat. I think we'll have to go back." Justin stops the drumming of his wand on the table to give them all an apologetic look for even saying it.

"Lupin might have things organized enough to make a bigger team anyway. And with the approval of the Ministry and the Order, we can actually use magic--"

"I'm sure the Death Eaters are still tracking magical use in the Muggle world, at least in the perimeter of their hideouts. The only reason none of them have seemed to show up here is because their numbers are down enough to be planning something else."

"Like what?" Justin looks up at the blond who finally turns to face the room.

"A bigger battle. They will not stay separated for much longer. They will organize, collect data, plan something brutal, and fight until the death. They have no other choices."

"So we're going back tonight if Harold doesn't show?" Hermione glares in thought at her shoes, but Draco confirms what she's already thinking.

"We're out of options. We have Portkeys to the other locations, and we could sleep wherever. But with no money, and no food… short of robbing a market. What do you want to do?"

She thought this was rhetorical until she looks up and finds him looking back seriously, waiting. She wonders when she earned the honor of his respect for her opinions about war. Her pride in herself is swift, but it doesn't make her overzealous. "The possible consequences are too great. If Harold doesn't come we'll go back ourselves. If Lupin hasn't organized something, it is unlikely he will use the force of action it would take for me to be stopped from getting what we need and coming back."

She might be a soldier, but she is not a puppet. Unless Lupin took her wand, locked her in a cell, or put her in a coma, she would be resuming the mission no matter what he said, or the consequences he promised. It was just easier to not go back and face them, to not run the chance of Lupin doing something drastic. She *has* to find Ron. It is something that overwhelms the passion and insistence of need.

Day: 1447; Hour: 11

Harold shows anyway while they are standing on the curb, the hotel manager sending them suspicious looks for not leaving when they checked out three hours before. Hermione ignores the woman dragging behind him and instead focuses her surprise on Seamus. Draco's body grows tense next to her, and on reaction she reaches out to brush her fingers against the inside of his wrist. She is more

surprised that he doesn't pull away than at herself for doing it.

"We couldn't get any new locations. I didn't even chance going back to Grimmauld... I barely escaped St. Mungo's. I made Portkeys to the house, but not the Ministry since those have to be done *by* the Ministry." By his tone of voice, Hermione is guessing he is the only one in the group who hadn't already known this. "I also went back to the house -- it's still empty -- and stocked up on more food."

Harold finished with a proud smile over the top of Lavender's head before kissing her properly. Seamus kept his eyes to the ground, but the woman smiled when she saw that the silent, tense attention was now focused on her.

"Margarete Ust," she steps forward, shaking their hands, "My brother is missing as well. I had heard some rumors about a group going rogue to find the missing. When I saw Harold I jumped on the chance."

"Nice to meet you. I'm guessing no one else is trying to find them?" Justin smiles in that innocent way that Hermione always found endearing because it was so honest.

"They're still organizing, from what I understand. Teams have been sent out, though no one knows what for, but them and the higher-ups. It's possible, but all I know is that I wasn't invited and I have to find my brother."

"Well, the more the merrier." Justin smiles again, and Hermione finally notices that the woman is rather pretty -- she had been too busy scrutinizing her for a possible trust issue. "Well... it's not really merry is it, but the more the better... and quicker... to find everyone. Of course."

Draco's forehead crinkles and he places two fingers to his temple, closing his eyes as if he is internally threatening an oncoming headache. "If he isn't a virgin, I am honestly surprised."

Hermione smiles, if only because he mutters it low enough for only her to hear, and she likes when he makes things personal. She still throws him a look, though, because Justin's fumbling is cute and she doesn't know how to stop defending people.

Day: 1447; Hour: 17

"Hermione."

She looks up from Lavender's explanation of the plans to Margarete to find Seamus standing in the hallway. He nods his head toward the door at his shoulder. She brings her eyes around to Draco's across the living room, not surprised to find him looking at her. She isn't sure if he's still angry with her for digging so hard about his family. His attitude had mostly waned into brooding since Harold came back, but she doesn't know if he is setting it aside because he's over it or because there were bigger things to concentrate on at the moment.

She stands and Seamus walks into the bedroom as she starts down the hall, knowing this had to come eventually. Lavender is sending her nervous looks, and there is rustling sound from Draco's direction that stops when she takes her wand from the top of the television set. Not that she thinks she will have to use it, but she knows Seamus' temper is something to be careful around. Much like the blond's.

She closes the door, relaxing when she finds a rather defeated looking Seamus at the edge of the bed with his head in his hands. "What did you want?"

He sighs heavily, rubbing his fist into the center of his forehead, pausing before he looks up at her. "I'm sorry."

"I don't know if that's good enough this time, Seamus."

A flash of anger across his face, but he keeps it in check. "I went too far, and I know that. I can't say anything else but I'm sorry, so if it's not good enough, there's no point in you even coming in here."

"Well, perhaps I want an explanation. I've known you since we were children, Seamus. We've never been best friends, but I grew up with you. You should know that--"

"That's the thing."

"What?" If growing up with her and never being best friends was his explanation for the horrible things he had said, sorry really wasn't good enough.

"I know you pretty well, Hermione. I mean… I know war changes us. I've always been a prideful person, and sometimes I let aggression get the best of me. You've seen me during a Quidditch game… it gets ugly."

She almost smiles--his is fake. He sighs heavily again and stands, pacing the floor with his hands shoved in his pockets. "I know that you--"

"Wait, hear me out. I've been holding onto my hatred for Malfoy because he reminds me of why I'm fighting. When I'm out there, in a battle, I know why I'm fighting. When I'm killing someone, I know. When I'm pulling dead bodies off the ground, I know. But when I get back to one of the houses, it sort of leaves me. I start wondering why I'm here, and not on a beach somewhere, hiding out from the war. I wonder why I haven't taken my family and ran. I wonder why I'm putting my life at risk every second of the day."

"We all do."

"I know. Because we shut down to deal with it. We don't think about the people that have died, because we can't. And when I'm alone, surrounded by good people who want to get away as well... I want to take us all and leave. I want to let the Death Eaters take it and let us all find somewhere else to live, rather than something to die for. You know?"

"You have to remember what--"

"That's it! Malfoy is my way of keeping myself in check, and I know it sounds shoddy, but that's what it is. Every time I'm out of battle too long, every time I've had long enough to convince myself I'm not that brave at all, I look at him and I picture the Dark Mark and a hood. I look at him and I remember Hogwarts, and the things he's done. Sometimes I look at him, and I imagine that he's his father. I ignore the things that other people haven't, because I need to hate him. Do you understand?"

She hesitates, stumbled over air with strange cracks of words before admitting the truth. "No, not really."

"And that's the thing. Because I thought you would, Hermione. I thought out of everyone, you would see that I needed that. You were the girl he put through hell. You were the girl he hated based on blood. You were the epitome, to him, of who he had to kill to win. And you should hate him just like me. You should hate him to remind yourself, or because he deserves it, or because you need to."

"I don't need to hate him, Seamus. I hate Death Eaters. Draco's a Phoenix just like we are," she says this quietly because Seamus is looking at her like he's begging for her to understand, and she can't.

"I know. It just feels like if I let one in... I... I just have to hate them all, all of them that came from that place. I have to, because I *kill them*, Hermione. I can't begin to think they're human, or I'll lose it. I swear I'll lose it. I know it's stupid. And I know, I

guess maybe, Malfoy might have earned a little more… respect from me. But it has to wait for after the war. *Because I need to hate him.*"

He says the last sentence in a desperate way that makes her chest clench up, though she doesn't know who it's for. Seamus sits on the bed again, his fingers curling up the comforter. He looks up at her, and he knows she does not understand, and that she doesn't agree, but he stares like she might change her mind if he doesn't look away.

"Seamus, I…" Hermione doesn't know what to say.

"I shouldn't have said those things. It's just that I thought you would understand out of everyone. It felt like… like betrayal. But we all have done things other people don't agree with during this war. I hate what you're doing, and you probably don't like what I'm doing… but if I'm going to move on and ignore it for now, you must do the same for me. And I am sorry… Really. I wouldn't have come back if I wasn't."

Day: 1447; Hour: 20

The sky is black. There is a wall behind her, cold stone aching into her shoulder blades. Her fingers are wet as they feel along the ridges, searching for the end of the wall, and she knows it is her blood. She would like to scream out to know if the gasps of breath somewhere in front of her are her friends, or their enemies. But she can see a rainbow of color exploding into the rock around her and into the shakes of her body if she does, and death is not something she gives into so easily.

It is complete darkness around them, the sense of sight shut down and shoved into someone else's eyes that are not their own. But she can still taste dirt, feel the frozen wall, smell the metallic bite of blood and the acrid stench of Dark Magic that reminded her of gasoline and bad body odor. She can hear the breathing across from her, another ragged breath a little further back and to her right. Her senses sharpened on their own, shoved into better working order by another, her sense of survival.

Her fingers find the edge, the lack of oxygen burning in her lungs, and the breathing stops across from her when her trainers skid over a rock. She breathes in raggedly, like fire, and yells out a stunning spell in the direction she last heard the breathing. She flings herself around the corner of the wall as the red spell lights up her face and the air, the vicious rage on the boy's face before he falls. Hermione trips, banging her arms and cheek against the pebbles and dirt at the other side of the wall. Green light smashes into the wall where she had been, and she stumbles to her feet and further down as the rock gives way and crumbles.

She bites her tongue hard enough to draw blood when a chunk collides with her shoulder, the wounded one that the healing balm from Harold has yet to take care of. She turns the corner sharply, sending out a random hex to light the area, and then the Killing Curse at the man running toward her. Blood sprays from her mouth as she yells it, and she's almost afraid that the gurgle messed it up before she sees the man fall face forward.

Hermione spits and it hits the front of her shirt, soaking through to her chest as she rounds the corner again; the first man already on his feet judging from his voice. "You fucking bitch!"

He yells the Killing Curse over and over, and it hits the wall all the way down, cracking rock and crashing her barrier to the ground. Hermione turns quickly, spitting again, but in too much of a panic for it to go further than over her lip and down her chin. She can see his wand turn toward her just as the green light vanishes into blackness again, and she does not have time to pray that she is quicker.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" she screams, and he is silent again.

She gasps in several breaths before calming them, her ears pulled up as she searches for sound. She feels as if she has fallen into a black abyss from which she will never emerge, and doesn't think she will ever look at a blind person without pity again, despite how much they might not want it. She runs forward, as light on her feet as is possible for them taking all her weight, but rocks and twigs mark her path. Briefly, she wonders if she is dead, and this is the place where they sent the sort of person war had made her.

There is a crunching noise from behind her and she turns quickly, slipping over grass. A blue light strikes and burns out within a second; a spell done wrong, but it shows enough for Hermione to see Lavender's hair and the glint of her eyes.

"Lav," Hermione whispers, but it's still too loud. She waits for a noise, a spell, but nothing comes at first.

"Hermione…you okay?"

"More bloody than I should be, is all. I'm fine." Hermione doubts she could have seen her, but explains just in case.

There is a sickly sort of silence from Lavender that lasts too long, and Hermione's stomach clenches with fear. "I, uh… I'm afraid I can't say the same for myself."

It comes out thick, like there is a ball of blood nestled in her throat, and Hermione is running toward her voice before she even finishes the sentence. There is a loud scraping of rocks and Hermione finds her on the ground when she gets there, having to feel along clothes and skin for Lavender's face. Bile and food are making plans of upheaval in her stomach as her hands grow wet and sticky, and Lavender's breathing stops to whine out pain.

Suddenly Hermione remembers the dog she had when she was a child, who went and lay down and refused to come, who whined and whimpered his death instead of howling. Suddenly Hermione realizes just how bad this might be, with Lavender's shirt absolutely soaked in blood as she emitted nothing but whimpers and the shaking of silent sobs.

"Lav, Lavender. *Lavender*!" Hermione yells this, and she doesn't care that it's too loud because the last thing she can think of is the possibility of her own death.

"Hermione," and she breaks finally, an echoing, tormented sob, "I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I don't--"

"I know, I know. You're going to be fine, hm?" Hermione whispers, and she is crying too, stroking her hand along the other woman's hair. The strands stick to the blood on her hand as she shoves her other hand in her pocket.

"I--You... Will--"

"Shut up, Lavender. Don't do that. Don't you dare." Hermione had lived too much of her life in battle to not know when someone was planning their goodbye, and she refuses to listen to Lavender's, because *it's not true*. It can't be.

A whimper, clogged with tears and dark possibilities. Lavender's voice sounds like a child's, their first year, when war was a little further away but they all still missed their mothers. "I'm scared."

"No reason. No reason to--*fuck!*" Hermione screams, throwing down the wrong bag of Portkeys and digs again, her hands shaking terribly and her body numb with panic. "You're gonna have kids, right? Kids, and be married, and they will... So much to fight for, Lav."

"I just--"

"You promise me you'll hold on, okay? Swear on it." Hermione throws the other bag down viciously, hating that she kept the ones to St. Mungo's on the bottom since

they were used less. *But needed more*, she chokes in her mind. "Needed more."

Lavender is shaking against Hermione's knees, and Hermione finally hears the gurgling over her own determination to get the bag open. Her fingers dig too hard into Lavender's jaw as she throws her head to the side, feeling the blood, or vomit, or saliva run from Lavender's mouth and over her fingers. Lavender's head is jerking back and forth, and it takes Hermione a second to know it is from the fierce shaking of her own hand.

She wrenches the other woman's hand up and slaps the Portkey into her palm, squeezing Lavender's fingers around it and placing the fist on top of the decreasing movement of Lavender's stomach. Hermione bends forward, pressing her forehead to Lavender's hair and her lips to her temple, skin sliding over skin in tears and blood.

"Fight, and I swear to God you'll never see this war again," Hermione whispers, and jerks back before the pull at her naval can take them together.

Her tears and shaking have gone, but she is still kneeling in the same spot a long time later when the orange sparks light up the sky. It is their signal that the house has been cleared, and another out in the field of darkness lights up. Hermione knows that if there were any Death Eaters in her area they would have found her by now, so she sends up the same signal, giving two tries before she is able to stand.

"We found three prisoners. Two were citizens, one was an Auror." Seamus' voice, loud and crisp, breaking through her fog.

Hermione takes a deep breath, focusing herself, getting back into the right frame of mind. Lavender would live--she had to. "Search again."

"We did." Justin this time, his voice edging closer as he walked toward the house.

"You sent--" Hermione cuts herself off as a beam of light hits her, Draco standing no more than three arm lengths from her.

"Merlin," a female voice chokes, coughs. Margarete's, Hermione thinks.

He has a look on his face that reminds her of when she heard the sick silence from Lavender, and she knows he sensed something was wrong. Wrong enough for him to walk toward her so quickly, to search her out in the dark.

"I'm fine."

"Bullshit you're fine! Send her to Mungo's now!" Seamus yells, but Hermione can't tear her eyes away from Draco's face.

"Shoulder, bit my tongue, got a slicing curse to my back. We can handle it at the house."

"Where's Brown?" Because all it really took was a look at all the blood on her and the ground, the Portkeys all around her feet.

"Hospital. She..." Hermione shakes her head, chokes it back.

"Is she dead?" Margarete asks, because it is just another body to her.

"No! No, but she... It doesn't look good." Hermione tries to cough over the sob, but they all know differently.

Harold is gone before Hermione can even breathe in, and she coughs again, again, her throat dry like dirt covered rocks. She coughs herself out of breath, bending forward to put her hands on her knees, and she vomits so hard she feels her eyes bulge.

Someone puts their hand on her hair even though she always pulls it back on a mission for better vision. Justin, judging by the shoes, and his hand finds her back to run circles. "They will have her all healed up in no time."

She nods, even though she doesn't really know for sure. She breathes in quickly, panting - not for the oxygen, but to remind herself of her life. "He'll write, right? He'll let us know."

"Lavender will, at least." Justin is smiling she can hear, but she also knows that he is crying too.

Day: 1448; Hour: 10

Harold left behind everything, including the Portkey Hermione, Draco, Justin, and Seamus take to the cemetery. The four of them stand on the hill that overlooks the casket and the group gathered to bid Neville farewell.

She is fairly sure they all know of the four's presence, but not even Harry raises his shoulders from their slump as the casket lowers down. Hermione watches, her own shoulders shaking, wiping savagely at the tears that blind her vision. She allows this moment to bow to grief, to feel weak within its tide, and play her memories of

Neville like a marching band inside her mind.

"Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there, I do not sleep. I am in a thousand..." The words grind on the wind up the hillside, and Justin and Draco's hands meet hers at the same time she finds her whole body shaking.

It is familiar, though it has no right to be, the funeral song that plays on. *I miss you,* Hermione thinks, above the chords that bleed the oxygen from her lungs. *I miss you*.

Twenty-Four

Day: 1449; Hour: 2

She finds him in silence in his bedroom, the lamplight dull on his desk, his back pressed into the corner as he sat on his bed. His door was cracked, and she wonders if he knew she would come. He doesn't look at her when the door clicks shut behind her, or when she stands there silently for too long. She doesn't know if he's thinking about Neville or if he's thinking about all of the friends he lost, on both sides of the war. She doubts the latter, because taking on that burden would leave anyone too deep to dig out.

She thinks she understands what he had meant about not wanting to tell her about his father. After the funeral, thinking of Neville, she knew she wouldn't tell those memories to someone who hated him. But as much as Hermione would never know more than the evil in Lucius Malfoy, she did know the power of death, and the sorrow it spread like disease.

"Do you think we will ever get back what we have lost?"

"No."

He looks down at the notebook in his lap, indecision marked by the ink spots on his fingers. He meets her eyes and she drops them to her toes, but she knows that he's still staring. She clears her throat, having to talk before it grows more uncomfortable --before she backs out.

"Can I just…maybe…lay on the other side of the bed for awhile?" Silence. She does not want to be alone tonight, and she might go so far as to say she can't be. "I mean, my bed is…is… I, well, nev--"

"Lay down, Granger."

Her heart gives an unwelcome jolt, and her breath hitches just the slightest bit. She had been rambling in her awkwardness, and would have regretted asking had the uncomfortable air not at least put a rest to her thoughts for a bit. She had been backing out when he responded, and if she didn't want it so badly, she still would. If it had been that uncomfortable just waiting for an answer, the event itself would be drowning in terrible.

But she had already asked, and he has now agreed. Besides, she does need this, or else she never would have found the courage to ask in the first place. Neville, and her guilt and worry over Lavender, and then it was everything. It was everything to the point she might be losing her mind a little. She could have gone to Justin perhaps, but she didn't think about it. She has grown too used to going to Draco. Justin wouldn't have been the same.

She walks around the bed and lays down, tense and staring at the ceiling. He knocks his pen against his notebook a couple times, and she blushes at the thought that he might be staring at her in all her awkward glory. There wasn't much of a reason for her to feel such a way anymore, but they had only lain in bed together after sex. Sex isn't what she came for, though she would give it to him if he wanted. She just wanted to...well, lay there. If she is honest with herself she would like to put her head on his chest maybe, and lose herself in the blankets perhaps, but she can settle sometimes.

"Did you take the potions?"

"Yes." Which is the reason she can lay on her back at the moment, since the pain potions made sure she couldn't feel a thing. She really doesn't understand why he hates them so much.

"Where's the balm?"

"Justin put it on for me."

He grunts, maybe because she needs to take her shirt off for someone to put it on her back and shoulder blade. She has, without a doubt, seen Draco a little possessive and jealous before. She still likes it. She almost tells him that Justin was a perfect gentleman, and that she views him like a little brother, but she doesn't know how he will react to that. It might overstep a boundary - him knowing he was jealous, and him knowing she knew he was jealous. She never knows what's crossing the line with him, so she keeps it to herself, like she does with a lot of things.

"You're closest."

"What?" She looks over at him as he pushes himself down the bed, tossing the notebook to the floor. She is distracted when he takes his shirt off, shoving his pants to his ankles and kicking them off. She has never seen him undress without real intentions. She thinks it's kind of sad that the simple things are still new to her.

"You're closest to the light."

Now she remembers saying it to him about things like turning the channel on the television when there was no remote, unlocking and opening the door of a meeting room when someone knocked, getting snacks from the kitchen,

"You never do it when you're closest."

"Point?" He stretches, palms pressed against the wall, muscles contracting and hips moving. She almost rethinks the whole sex thing.

"That is my point."

"Weak. I hope you can sleep with the light on th--"

"I can just fine. It's you who has to board up the windows when it's light out because you need it so dark."

He grabs her then, an odd look on his face like he's trying to be sure about this when he's not. He pulls her up against him and presses his face into her hair and the bed. He exhales against her neck, and she pretends she doesn't press closer at the feeling. "Pitch black."

She doesn't speak, no words within her head, but there is something warm at the pit of her stomach where the hollow pang had been. She wraps her arms around his shoulders and cradles his head like a child, closing her eyes against the light and falling into him to block the thoughts. Perhaps it should have been awkward. It really should have been. It wasn't.

Day: 1448; Hour: 8

Margarete smiles, sweeps her hair behind her shoulder, and brushes her finger across Draco's knuckles. Hermione glares for so long that her cereal overfills the bowl, skittering across the counter and the floor.

Day: 1449: Hour: 13

"Is that necessary?"

"Yes," Hermione snaps, adding tape to the side of the note.

"Someone might find it suspicious."

"No one comes here. I haven't been to this house once before this - hardly anyone

has." Hermione knows she's being rather rude to the woman, but Margarete seems to be ignoring it anyway.

"This place was overtaken by rats and all the cabinets were filled with rotten food when we got here. It's why we picked the place." Justin explains more thoroughly.

"But if someone does show up you're going to be letting them know that we're the ones who are here."

"No one will show up," Hermione bites out the words, sending the woman a glare for her continuous need to judge Hermione's choices. Fine, choice, but *really*.

"I don't know. Did you ask Draco?" Hermione's fingers pause on their journey along the tape, and she can feel her jaw clench. "I'm going to ask him, just to be sure that-"

"There's no need for you to ask *Draco*, because I'm leaving the note up--" Hermione begins, slowly turning toward Margarete in a way that most know as *danger, danger, danger*.

"Malfoy doesn't make the decisions here. Hermione wants to leave a note to Harold in case he shows up, and that's what she will do. Period." Seamus, for once, is on her side.

Hermione comes very close to throwing her shoe at the woman when she walks by the open door to Draco's bedroom not five minutes later, finding Margarete sitting beside him on the bed and whispering. Draco looks up at her but she avoids his gaze, walking away quickly and glaring at the air.

Day: 1449; Hour: 16

They find four bodies and a Phoenix locked in what used to be a freezer. Hermione isn't sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing that the freezer wasn't turned on - the Phoenix is alive, but the moment she and Justin open the door, they both vomit. She isn't sure how long the corpses have been rotting, but the stench is so thick she feels sure she will never get it off her skin.

Wrapping an arm around the woman's shoulders, shaking against her arm, Hermione is reminded of Lavender with stark clarity. She breathes in too deeply and gags, rotting flesh, urine, and feces sitting stagnant in her lungs. She keeps it down though, pulling the cap of the marker off with her teeth. She writes P E:CP D:?, for Prisoner Exposed:Corpses Days:Unknown. It is standard to send them to hospital

with such information, and Hermione Portkeys the woman out when Justin returns.

"I got the tablecloths - I couldn't find anything else." His voice is mumbled from the arm over his mouth, and Hermione rushes out and away from the freezer to gulp in relatively clean air.

She is glad she hadn't eaten before she left; gagging again at the trail of feces she leaves from her boots. "Oh, God."

Justin knows enough to have looked away, swallowing hard and tossing her a pair of dish-washing gloves. "I don't know if I can do this."

"We have to. Just don't let anything on your skin and don't breathe in. Corpses are cesspools of bacteria."

Justin nods, turning his head away from the sight in front of them. Hermione had only been able to glance when they first opened the door, and that had been enough for her to know they were dead. Bodies bloated, skin rotting, dead. "One at a time? You take one side I take the other, tuck the thing around them, put the Portkey...wherever on them?"

"Yeah, yeah," Hermione agrees, but neither of them move.

"Shit, I can't do this."

"It's a matter of respect, not just for the body but the healers. We also can't send bodies this decomposed unwrapped because--"

"I know, I know. Count of three?" Justin asks, and she grabs the other side of the tablecloth, both of them breathing in deep before running into the room.

They're gasping for breath after the second when she hears retching behind her; Draco is vomiting into the sink, Margarete on her shoes, and Seamus's back disappears around the corner. Hermione watches Draco's shoulders heave for a moment, realizing that it's the first time she has ever seen him react to any death he sees.

There wasn't much in the way of avoiding the natural reaction to the stench though. It is blistering out in the room, filling up the cavities of air with a hot, rotting odor more vile than she can stand. Justin's eyes are pleading for them to finish, so she grabs her side of the cloth again, doing a strange cough/gasp and holding in the oxygen as they run back in.

The rats scatter again, and she avoids looking at the body as much as possible, laying the cloth over it and quickly tucking it from the ankle to the temple. The body squishes in some places and feels like a plastic ball of air in others, but she tries to ignore the feeling, running back out of the freezer.

"I would help, but you guys seem to have a good system going." Margarete ushers from the hall.

"Where are the Portkeys?" Draco's face is twisted up into a grimace but he's still in the room, doing far more than the worthless sack of an Auror named Margarete. Hermione officially does not like the woman.

"Pocket," Hermione pops her hip in his direction, not daring to look at her gloves and what might be on them.

Draco doesn't either, cramming four fingers into her pocket to pull out the bags of Portkeys. "Which one is for the hospital?"

"The first one you pulled out." *The ones they need the most, the ones they need the most.*

She waits for him to put the others bags back in her pocket but he doesn't, shoving them in his own and jerking his chin toward the freezer. "Do the last one."

The three of them suck in a breath and go in at the same time. The second Justin and Hermione stand from the last body, Draco is bending past her to lay the ribbon across the dead man's forehead, careful not to touch the skin. They break for the hallway this time, slamming the door shut on the freezer on their way out. Hermione is already ripping one glove off before she even breathes in again.

"It's not coming off." Justin, panicked at her side. Hermione finds herself with the same problem, the nervous sweat on her palms sticking the rubber to her skin.

"Relax. I saw a knife when I was washing my mouth out." Margarete squeezes Justin's shoulder and Hermione stops slapping and scraping her wrist against the frame of the door.

"A knife? You're not cutting this off, that--"

Hermione has a free hand, and there is no way she was trusting Margarete with a knife near her, so she gets it herself. Justin follows, and they cut the rubber from the wrist to the tip of their index fingers, spearing the glove and using pressure on the

knife to propel it off their hands.

Draco slams the door firmly behind them, but the smell has lingered out in the hall. Hermione knows it's going to take a lot more than leaving this place to ever get the burn removed from her nostrils, and when she showers she might have to scrub two or three layers of skin off. She is also trying not to think of the bodies as more than corpses, because she knows if she thinks of how they were people once it will lead to thoughts that might send her to St. Mungo's herself.

"That was disgusting." Margarete scrunches her nose.

"You don't even know." Hermione's voice might sound harsh, but she doesn't care.

"We found something upstairs. Recently used dishes, clothes that didn't have the sitting-for-three-days smell in the washer, and a newspaper from yesterday." Seamus holds up the paper, tapping it against the wall with a smirk.

"So it's still occupied."

"Yup. What are we going to do?"

Hermione looks over at Draco to find him looking back at her. "Wait to see if they come back home?"

They waited out the night. No one sleeps. No one comes.

Day: 1450; Hour: 5

Rough, dotted, a bump that moves against her fingers. A soft, hollowed spot, two ridges, course hair, nipples that harden and bump under her palms. A heartbeat speeding up, the ridges of ribs, skin giving way over muscles that contract to mark her exploration, tendons that pull and bunch, the dip of a bellybutton. Hermione makes sure her skin remembers the feeling, muscle memory of the shape of him.

The roughness of new scars, the raised smoothness of old ones, his stomach that caves under her touch, the lines of his pelvic. These erase, for now, the memory of the bodies in the freezer. Another patch of course hair, the groan that rumbles under her cheek as she teases, half-circles her touch to the softness of his inner thighs. These take away her worries.

The hands, alternating rough and smooth skin, that grasp her arms and pull her up. Her skin pressed to his, the texture of his hair, the soft determination of his lips

on her neck, jaw, ear, her cheek. His arms around her, muscles bunching for a tighter squeeze, his questing fingers sliding down her back. His breath on her ear, his mouth hot and wet on hers. These make her forget herself.

Day: 1450; Hour: 9

It wouldn't be cheating, not really, if Draco slept with Margarete. There are no rules that keep either one from doing it, and though she knows Draco doesn't currently sleep with anyone else, he still could if he wanted to. There is no reason for him not to, and Hermione isn't even sure if she's an adequate enough lover to keep him to herself. She thinks she is, judging by his reactions, by the fact that he always came back, but she wasn't sure.

He could go and sleep with anyone, any time. Hermione hates even the idea of it, and she hates it enough to treat Margarete like the woman might have sprung up from a pile of feces and constantly smells like it. There is this jealous anger toward her that intensifies whenever Margarete even looks at him too long. He's too beautiful. She should have started this with an ugly man, she thinks, but she also knows that it probably wouldn't have happened had it been anyone else but him.

Hermione doesn't think she has any real right to feel jealous, but it makes her feel better to know Draco gets jealous himself. Since the beginning, when he refused to kiss her if she was with anyone else. Then that rage that had taken over him when he thought she and Harold were warded up in her bedroom in the middle of the night. Neither one of them might have a right to feel such a way, but it didn't mean that it stopped them.

She doesn't know if she could keep sleeping with him if he did sleep with Margarete. At the thought of stopping, the ugly burn of jealousy turned to something else that made her sick to her stomach. But she really doesn't know if she could still look at him the same, knowing other women could see him like she does. It makes her feel angry and vicious, and these are dangerous because it makes her not feel like herself. Hermione had only-child-complex -- that was all. She just doesn't know how to share, and that's really all it's about.

But he knows she's jealous, because she didn't even think to hide it. She simply reacted in the negative to nearly everything Margarete said or did, and Draco caught her glaring too often not to know. He never said anything, never reacted - he would just look at her. Until that morning.

They had made it a habit to leave any marks where they could be hidden by clothes, if they were going to leave any marks at all. Hermione blames the haze of

her lust, and *fine*, the rush of her possessiveness, for the mark she left on his neck the night before. It is bold and red against his skin - her mouth had made sure it would stay - and his fingers are pressed against it when he walks out of the bathroom. He looks at her with an eyebrow raised, his shirt forgotten in his other hand.

"Oops." She was hoping her innocent smile was working but it didn't, judging by the way he smirks at her.

They have a potion in the medicine cabinet that would get rid of it in two minutes, and she knows that he knows it. He pulls his shirt on instead and walks over to her, grabbing her hand to pull her off the bed. His hands slide into her hair, pulling it back on her head, and she thinks he's going to kiss her until his lips go to her neck.

She moans into his shoulder when he sucks the skin into his mouth, hard. He bites down, sucks, and her hands wrinkle his shirt as she closes her eyes. He laves the spot with his tongue when he's done, his mouth leaving a wet trail up to her ear. "Primitive, Granger."

Day: 1450; Hour: 10

Seamus glares at her neck, Margarete stares, and Draco smirks when he catches her blushing. Justin is far too occupied complaining about his burnt pancakes to notice anything. Hermione wonders if Draco is testing her, if there is something she's supposed to get through his actions. If so, she doesn't know what it is.

Day: 1450; Hour: 15

My dearest Son. Hermione blinks, reads it again, and stares some more. She looks up at the date, noting the letter was written one month and three days ago. A flourish of perfect script, wide circles, a female's hand. She almost begins to read but slams the papers down on top of it instead, not daring to let curiosity win.

Narcissa, his mother. Hermione had thought she was dead. "You might shag me, but that doesn't grant you permission to my privacy."

Hermione closes her eyes, mouths a curse that just comes out on a breath. He sounds furious, and she knows that he knows what she found, or he wouldn't care as much. Granted, Draco has always been profoundly private, but if it had only been a stack of plans he wouldn't be so angry. Now, it is a breach of trust. How long had he been standing there? Had he been waiting to see if she read it?

"I was looking for plans, Draco, I swear." Hermione turns toward him, hands out in surrender.

"And you couldn't wait the five minutes it took for me to be done showering?" His body is stone still, and he's closed the door, which can't be good.

"I really didn't think it would matter."

"It wouldn't matter? To come into my bedroom, to go through my things?"

"Draco, it's a stack of old plans and building maps!"

"And the new plans would be at the bottom of those, would it?" he yells, the angry vein burning red, his knuckles white in their fists.

"I didn't know! How many times have I been in your bedroom with the opportunity to snoop through your things while you were sleeping, or in the shower, or on a mission? And I never have! I respect your privacy, it wasn't about that!" Because she needed this to not be the end of the trust he has given her, the trust she hadn't even really known she had until now.

It was such a battle for them to get to this point. This long, hard fight of steps forward and back, and she couldn't have this be a jump back to the beginning. She refuses to give up so much ground because an accidental find.

"Bullshit. Get out."

"What?"

"Get. *Out*."

"Draco, that isn't bullshit, if you think about this for a second--"

"I am going to--"

"It's not like I'm going to tell anyone! Have I ever told anyone anything that--"

"Damn right you're not going to tell anyone. You won't have to worry about your inadequacy in battle, Granger, I'll fucking kill you myself."

She stares at him, blinks, and it hurts. It hurts even though she knows he is only saying it because he is so livid, and not because he means it. She thinks, at least.

But he's marching up to her, grabbing her arm, and her back hits the wall too hard. She cries out at the pain from the wounds on her back, but he just keeps staring, his face hot and red in front of her.

"Swear to God."

"Draco--"

"Swear. To. God. I have worked far too long and far too hard for my mother to die like the rest of them, do you understand?" She takes too long to answer and he pulls her up from the wall, maybe to throw her back again, but she slaps him across his head before he does anything else.

"Don't you dare. You can try to hurt me as much as you want, Draco Malfoy, and I still won't agree to anything I wouldn't agree to in the first place." She shoves him hard, but he hardly moves. "I'm sorry you don't trust me enough to know I didn't do this on purpose, and that I won't tell a soul about it. But you're *hurting me*

He lets go of her suddenly, stepping back like it took her saying it for him to realize. His hands hover over her shoulders and clench before dropping to his sides. She wonders if he was so angry that he really didn't notice. It is the possibility of his mother's death, at least in his eyes. She might have grown angry and determined enough to not notice either.

But still... "If you ever do that to me again, I will make sure there's no one left to protect your mother, Draco. *Swear. To. God*."

She practically marches out of the room. He lets her.

Day: 1450; Hour: 20

There are libraries full of perfect quotes; piles of literature that people read and recite from because it speaks the truth at the heart, no matter how dark, ugly, or beautiful that truth might be. They take the complexity of the human condition and phrase it into elegant lines that take on masterful significance.

Hermione has read many of these books. She has spoken many of these quotes. But for all her intelligence, her long hours of study, the parts of her life given to reading, she finds herself lacking in this moment. The very sky itself seemed to set on fire, and the moment it blazes the world to light and heat scorches her face:

"Oh, *shit*." That is all those piles of literature add up to in that moment.

The wizard stands far enough away from her that she can just make out the hood and his mask, his figure bent over. She throws up a blocking spell that seems to roar itself through her body and out of her wand, just as the man jerks upward from his bow and whips his wand in an arc around him. The storm of flames follows his direction, searing across the blue shimmer of the protective shield in front of her. She closes her eyes, grinds her teeth, forcing that power she learned was magic out into her wand.

The force of the wizard's spell is like a physical impact against her, and she has to dig her feet for purchase and ignore the sudden dead-weight feeling of her arm. She focuses her magic, shoving it through her wand, yelling her defiance through her teeth. Her muscles burn with the fury of having had enough, but she refuses, knowing what giving up means. Then it's over, the power of his magic blasting itself against her own suddenly gone.

She opens her eyes as he Apparates away, just in time to miss a jet of green. The fire he created has now engulfed the large building they had came to search, and her heart starts beating again, obnoxious pounds of fear.

"I had to step outside your barrier to get a shot at him, so I waited until the fire cleared us. Got away though." Justin breathes, and when he grabs her shoulder she notices that she is trembling from the aftershocks of using so much magic.

"He could have came back anywhere on the property." She hurriedly looks behind them.

"No, he knows it's over. Two against one, he would be sure to die. There's nothing in the building he can save now, obviously. He probably thinks we're here with the Order anyway, which means backup will be coming. He's outnumbered."

"They don't always do things that make sense," she snaps, but she doesn't mean to. "Are any of them in there?"

"One of them sent up the evacuation sparks the moment the sky lit up. Didn't you see?"

"I was a little occupied," she huffs, and thanks her adrenaline as the only thing carrying her. She is surprised she hasn't passed out with the amount of energy the protection spell robbed her of.

"Shit," Justin whispers, and she notices the green sparks close to the burning building. Orange for cleared, blue for evacuate, red for medical aid, purple for next plan, and green for backup.

They take off in a sprint toward the lights; already sweating from the run and the heat of the fire by the time they find Draco and Seamus. Hermione almost falls face first when she sees who they are fighting: Aurors. Three of them, dressed in standard issue Auror uniforms, and one she recognizes from a few missions.

Draco's wand jerks back and forth, and she can see chunks of wall and bricks flying from the building and in front of the Killing Curse, following the path of his wand. Seamus is yelling stunning spells that stop working after no more than five seconds. A pair of feet is showing from the lining of the trees, and Hermione is betting they belong to Margarete.

Seamus is sitting on the ground, and it takes the back of his blood-soaked shirt to know his red hair is darker than it should be. He sways gently, his spells sometimes missing. Draco's arm is hanging oddly, coated with blood, he's shooting from the wrong hand, and there is an odd bump in his shirt where is ribs are.

Justin begins firing off stunning spells and Hermione turns away from them and bolts, back across the front of the building and to the other side. There is only one spell that could cause Aurors to attack their own and move in such jolting, puppet fashion - Hermione knows they will either have to kill the Aurors to save their own lives, or kill the source.

She isn't really thinking; her mind focused with a steady determination that she acknowledges, distantly, is likely to get her killed. But all she can see is the dizzy, almost not-there look on Seamus's face, the fear turned vicious with the shadows of the fire on Justin's, and Draco. Draco's shoulder propped up against the bark of a tree, the mud under his feet causing him to run in place sideways just to keep his feet from sliding out from under him. Mostly, the defeated slump to his shoulders, the tremble in his hand that let her know he was done.

Draco never went into a single mission with the hope of getting out, but he always gave it everything to ensure he did. She has never seen him without that steadfast determination, but some time between when he took off into the building and when she and Justin arrived, Draco had lost that. It was as if he knew, without a doubt, they would be sure to die here. It terrified her to see that, and almost convinced her it was true. She trusted him more than she could say, and if he knew it was a lost cause, it was.

But Hermione Ganger did not give up. Not through all of Hogwarts, not through this whole war. She doesn't know how, because she is brave, she is a fighter. She might be Harry Potter and Ron Weasley's best friend and Draco Malfoy's lover, but what came first, what always comes first, is that she is Hermione Granger.

Her feet skid out in the mud and she has to catch herself on the ground, the fire so hot it heats the mud that scorches her hands, her feet when it engulfs her shoes and leaks in. The impact of her hands sends sparks of mud fire against her face, and she scrambles forward until her feet hit grass traction and she's off again. The air is thick to breathe in, smoke and heat, and she chokes back her cough as she rounds the building.

She does not scream at the cracking in her leg as she hits her knees. In a very distant thought she knows that her eyes have gone wide and burn with smoke, and that her jaw has dropped in pain. There is hardly any time to think of that though, as a brutal pain sends shock waves through her leg and a weight flings itself on top of her. It knocks her back into the ground and she blinks at the snarling face above her as a hand tightens at her throat.

Hermione attempts to point her wand at the young girl, but finds her arm weighed down by another hand on her wrist. The girl couldn't be any older than fourteen, but her eyes are screaming murder and her teeth are bared to prove her anger. *Don't make me kill you*, Hermione pleads as the girl slides her hand up Hermione's in a reach for the wand.

Hermione punches her, straight on and into the nose, feeling it crack against her knuckles. The girl wails, leaving Hermione's throat for her nose on instinct. Hermione jerks her wand hand away from the distracted girl, slamming her arm into the girl's neck and throwing her body up at the same time, rolling them. Hermione tries to scramble to her feet but just falls back on her bum as the pain shoots up her leg, the girl scratching skin off her arm and pulling out a chunk of Hermione's hair.

"*Dad*--!" The girl begins to scream, and Hermione stuns her.

She hears the crunch of feet running over rocks and Hermione curses, not knowing how many are coming. She needs a distraction -- she needs something that will give her time. *Survival*, and then she's aiming her wand at the girl again and casting another Unforgivable she didn't know if she could forgive herself for. *Get up.* Hermione watches as she does, her heart hammering and her hand shaking in its aim, because she already knows what she's about to do. *Start crying. Now run toward the footsteps, hug the person they belong to.*

Hermione clenches her teeth so hard she fears they might actually give under the pressure, crumble in her mouth or pop out from her gums. The fear is nothing compared to the break in her leg, the shovel that was her downfall lying at her side. She staggers to her feet anyway, her arms whirling to catch balance. *Run to him.*

The man turns the corner before the girl makes it there, but he's too distracted by the sight of his crying daughter running toward him to look at her. It is a mistake that costs him his life as Hermione breaks the Imperius Curse and casts the Killing Curse. She struggles with her breath, the oxygen not wanting to feed her lungs, and it takes until the daughter is halfway back to her before Hermione can stun her again. Even the fire that has left her clothes soaked in sweat, her skin slick, and her hair dripping-wet, cannot kill the coldness inside her now.

Binding the girl, Hermione hops closer to the edge of the building. Even with bending her leg up, every jolt of her body sends a fresh wave of pain through her. She is exhausted with her spell work, the magic feeling gone from her body, but she can distantly hear Justin's screaming and knows there must be more Death Eaters behind the house.

Her hop lands her in thick mud and slides back. On instinct, her other foot drops to catch herself and she clamps her mouth shut on her scream. It's still loud, shrieking out of her throat and tears rush out from a blend of pain, and the sweat and smoke coating them. She bites her lips and breathes out little bursts of air from her nostrils, rolling over to cradle her leg.

"Oh, God. Oh, my God." She thinks maybe she can't do this after all, and she desperately wants to give in to the sweeping exhaustion.

But she knows the fire will eat her alive, that her friends will die, and so she rolls back over and *crawls* with one knee and two elbows. The fire feels as if it will set her on fire, like it's tearing her skin off in a heat she has never felt before. She tries to wipe the sweat from her eyes and forehead, but mud just smears all over her face instead. The girl begins screaming behind her.

She's gasping for breath now, and if the roar from the building wasn't so loud she would have been found out a long time ago. She spots three cloaks in the back yard, and one of the masks turn toward her just as she yells the Killing Curse again. The two others look in her direction and she shoves herself backward, rolling closer to the fire and hopefully out of their aim. She yells through her teeth and has to look down at her body to make sure she isn't on fire like it feels. She shoves herself forward again, wand aimed, to find the other two Death Eaters on the ground.

Hermione chokes and rolls onto her back, thrusting her wand up to the sky and red sparks explode like fireworks above her, again, again, and again. It's an Auror who finds her and she levels her wand at him before he raises his arms.

"They're dead, I'm a F. M." It is their code in case such a thing happened - Free Man. No Death Eater would know it to have them speak it.

Hermione drops her wand and feels the weightlessness of a levitating spell. "There's a girl bound back there--"

"We'll bring her in. Do you have Portkeys like that other guy on your team?"

"Yes - what's my team stats?" Hermione dug out the bag of Portkeys, frantic for information on her friends as the Auror cast a cooling charm on her.

"They're all alive. Malfoy, Ust, and the redhead are unconscious and sent to Mungo's. The other--" Hermione's relief is like a tidal wave inside of her, but there is one thing to take care of before she loses it to unconsciousness as well.

"I'm right here, right here." Justin laid a hand on her forehead and jerks it back, his face going pale.

"Obliviate that girl, Justin. She attacked me, I bound her, that was all."

"I won't forget!"

"Hermione, don't worry--"

"*Obliviate her*!" Hermione screams, then coughs over the drag in her throat.

"I'll never fucking forget what--" The rest of the girl's screams become lost in her sobbing.

"Okay. It's done." Justin nods, because children should never watch their parents die. Because there are some things war shouldn't take no matter what side you're on.

Hermione feels the call to sleep as she wraps her hand around a Portkey and lets her arm drop over her chest. The black edges in, the pull at her naval begins, and she is lost in a world of black before the pull even grows stronger.

Twenty-Five

Day: 1452; Hour: 13

Hermione opens her eyes, briefly, and makes to turn over until she finds her left leg uncooperative. She then thinks about how the short, blurry peek at the white, on white, on white was somehow very wrong. Her memories rush back before she even opens her eyes again. For that brief moment of time she had been truly without complicated thought. It was almost worth the broken leg.

The sensation of freedom jumped off a cliff and is now replaced by that familiar, well-hated bind of post-mission confusion. She breathes out a rasp and coughs, feeling a dull pain in her side at the movement. She is in St. Mungo's then, judging by the starkness, the lights blinking over her head, and the pain meter poster across her bed.

She is slow to catch the presence of someone else, and turns her head expecting a roommate. Instead she sees white-blond hair, an intense look in gray eyes, and a mouth slow to smile. It is a fake smile, and then she sees the sling holding up his arm, and the strange angle of his body.

"Draco." Somehow, he is the last thing she expects to see out of all the people it is possible to find at her bedside.

The roles were reversed. She wonders if this is how he has felt whenever he woke up to find her there. "It's about time, Granger. I thought you might actually die from a broken leg."

"H--" Her voice cracks and strangles itself, so she clears her throat, watching him grab a cup off the side table. "How long have I been out?"

"Two days. You would have woken up sooner, but they kept you under to heal."

"From a broken leg?"

"Burns. Your whole side, from your temple to your calf. A bit on the side of your back. The less movement you made, the faster your skin would heal. Should go without a scar now."

He hands her the cup and a straw. She takes a sip before her body's need takes

over and she chugs the water down in seconds. "I thought that heat was going to kill me."

"It almost did, from what they said. If you had passed out from the pain, which must have been a close thing, you would have been dead by the time they found you. All that stupid bravery, Granger. I told you it would kill you."

"I'm not dead," she gives him a glare, but it's empty. "We would have had to kill the Aurors if we didn't take down the Death Eaters first."

"I would have, but there were too many. I would have killed one by the time they killed me. Finnegan refused to kill them. I...I couldn't move enough to go around to get the Death Eaters. Finnegan would have been killed if I left him, and then I would have followed when they came after me."

"It was a bad situation."

He pauses, and then, like it was the hardest thing to say. "I figured we were dead. I knew Finnegan and I were losing it, and if I sent you and Justin around the other side we would definitely be dead, and you two would likely be as well. There wasn't enough time between curses to Portkey out without being dead by the time we left. You... You saved our lives."

Hermione blushes and shrugs. "It's what we're supposed to do, right? We're all full of stupid bravery - you too. I took a chance, it worked."

Draco nods, still looking uncomfortable as he stares at his thin hospital pants. "I didn't hear you behind me so I knew where you went. When an Auror went F.M and turned on the others, I was going to follow y--... I blacked out."

"I would suspect so. Jesus, Draco, your arm looked like it was practically cut off, and...broken rib?"

"Pulled it out of the socket, fractured my shoulder, broke my arm and my rib. I jumped out of the third floor when I saw the fire. Ground is rather unforgiving."

So is fire - she can feel the pain sharpening with every breath, and knows the pain potion is wearing off. "I'm glad you're okay. How is everyone?"

"Finnegan cracked his head, he was released this morning. Ust is...well, I heard she's alive. Brown, as well. She actually came to visit me yesterday and I couldn't get the bint to leave for over five minutes. I saw Justin in here yesterday, he left the

chocolate." Hermione exhales heavy relief at the news of Lavender and looks over to the table to find boxes of chocolate and flowers, but she is too concentrated on something else.

"You were here yesterday? In my room, I mean." She probably shouldn't have asked this, judging by the way his face goes blank.

"I wanted to see if you were really so weak that a broken leg was keeping you under for so long."

Hermione rolls her eyes, but smiles because his excuse is weak and he's likely to know it. He fidgets in his chair, his tongue shoved against his cheek, and she wonders what he's thinking about. He's in pain as well, she's sure, since he hates the pain potions so much.

"You know, I really didn't mean to find the letter." She thinks she should say this one more time, just in case he still doubted it. Doubted her.

"I know, Granger. I... I shouldn't have reacted like that."

The silence stretches on again. She busies her fingers on the edge of the sheet, the fabric rough and stiff. She thinks he might leave now, but he doesn't.

"You know, you heart speeds up when I say dirty things to you in your sleep."

"It does not!" She looks alarmed, her cheeks flaming.

She's not going to give it to him despite that it's probably true, since when his eyes light up and he laughs the thrumming light that signals her heartbeat blinks quicker. He glances up at it and then looks at her, his eyes tracking her blush before he meets her eyes. He's smiling that crooked grin that always makes her breathing hitch a little, and so she gives it to him. Just this time.

Day: 1452; Hour: 18

It's not Draco when she wakes up later, but the very irritated face of Harry Potter. She can only imagine how very angry he was the entire time she was gone when he still managed to look so upset when she's been laying in hospital for three days. He stares at her for a long moment, his fingers stopping the twirling motion of the flower between them. He sighs and tucks it into the vase with the others, clasps his hands, and bows his head.

"I'm happy you're okay, Hermione. I guess I should start there."

Hermione sighs now too, because he really isn't even going to wait until she's out of a hospital bed to start. "Thanks, Harry. I'm happy you seem to be back at normal health."

"Did you think it was okay? To not tell me about Ron until someone shoves a letter from you under my door a couple days ago - which, by the way, was late since Lupin told me the day after I was released from Mungo's. I'm still angry with him, but you, Hermione? *You* don't tell me?"

"It wasn't like I wanted to keep it a secret, Harry. I wanted to tell you, I felt guilty for not, but Lupin said it was best for your health, and I think it was! You were injured--"

"I already read all about it in your letter, Hermione, your tired excuses. I was injured? Hardly. My best friend is out there somewhere, waiting for me, and you--"

"He's my best friend as well."

"You lie to my face, you take off on a mission to find him, *without me*!"

"How does it feel, Harry?" She raises her voice now, propping herself up on the bed even though it sends pain up her side.

He pauses, his fingers tightening around the arms of the chair. He looks surprised, suspicious, and then cruel. "That's what this is about? Some sort of revenge--"

"Oh, please. I--"

"--on the "final battle". Have you really turned that vengeful of a--"

"Hey! While we're talking about it, Harry, did you notice how I never brought that up to you? Did you notice that I was obviously hurt about it, something like you might be feeling now -- *betrayed* -- but I had decided that *if* I brought it up at all, it would be after the war--"

"I--"

"No. You listen to me, Harry Potter. I know you're angry, but I'm laying in hospital right now after nearly dying, and you want to talk about this *now*? Harry, I love you,

but you're being selfish--"

"I'm being selfish? I'm not the one who refused to tell you about *Ron* because I was angry at--"

"That is not why I did it! I didn't tell you about Ron because it was best for your health, not just physically so you didn't run off, but mentally - at least until you collected yourself after killing Voldemort! You--"

"There are no excuses for not telling me, Hermione, and I won't accept any! If you were in my place..."

Hermione sinks back into the bed, trying to ease the tearing sensation from her side. "Maybe you're right. I'm sorry, Harry. Neville was dead, Ron was missing, I was scared you weren't...you weren't all together yet. I should have told you. I wasn't really thinking."

"No, you weren't. Because then you took off to go find Ron without telling me that either."

Hermione shrugs. "Maybe it was some subconscious desire to pay you back for not telling me about the battle with Voldemort. You also didn't know about Ron, you were still in a hospital bed, and I didn't know if you were all that...stable. Most of all, I didn't really think of it."

"How could you not think of it, Hermione?"

She hates how she feels guilty despite what he's made her feel for most this war. She hates that she still isn't sorry, and she wonders what kind of person that makes her. "Harry...this has been a very long war. I have been in so many battles, on so many missions over the *years*. And I did them without you. My head was so confused; I was running on routine. You..."

"I see," Harry whispers.

"You can be angry. You can not forgive me. But that is the truth."

"I don't have the room to be angry anymore." It sounds strange coming from him, because she knows he has always been one to run off his emotions first and his thoughts second.

"Harry, it... It took me a long time to realize who I am without Harry Potter. Ever

since I came to Hogwarts, you, Ron, and this war have defined my life. It took me a long time to figure it out, and I'm still learning, still growing. But it's been years since I've spent more than two days with you and--"

"Hermione, I never want you to know who you are without me. I mean… That is to say that I want you to know who you are as an individual, but I never want to stop being a part of your life. You're my best friend." She doesn't know she is crying until his fingers travel her cheeks.

"You're one of my best friends too, Harry. And we're going to make it through whatever else comes our way, I know we will. But you have to know that everything I do…it's not going to involve you. That every decision I make in my life isn't going to revolve around you anymore."

"I think that's okay." Harry nods and gives her a lopsided smile that takes her back to Hogwarts faster than any thing could. "But never this again, okay? If you're going to go out there and risk your life while I'm in contact distance, I want to know about it. If it's something important, I want to know about it. Deal?"

"I think that's okay," she repeats, and smiles a little, accepting the careful hug he gives her head. This has been easier than she thought it would be - but it would be harder later. It always was.

"Lupin's putting a team together. We'll both be on it. We'll find Ron together. He's putting a couple Aurors on it, Lavender--"

"No, he isn't."

"What?"

"I promised. I told Lavender that if she fights for her life, I *promised* she would not be in this war again."

"She told me." Harry smiles faintly and shrugs a shoulder. "Lavender requested the team."

"What?"

"She requested it. Unfinished business, she said."

Hermione breathes a laugh and shook her head. "Gryffindors."

It's supposed to be playful, but Harry is watching her too closely. His fingers tap on the plastic of the chair, and his voice is careful when he speaks. "Lupin's putting Malfoy on the team as well."

"It shouldn't be a problem. With the whole Lucius thing, I mean."

"Is there, uh..." He shrugs again, doesn't meet her eyes, and she knows what's coming. "You and Malfoy are friends?"

"Good friends, I would say." She would very much say, and she almost laughs.

"Damn," Harry presses his lips together and nods, and Hermione thinks that it isn't just Harry who has to learn the new person inside their best friend. Even simple conversation showed changes in who he is now. "He was walking down the corridor right before I came in and started glaring at me. I thought it was about what happened, but you said there isn't a problem..."

Hermione blushes and shrugs. Draco had said that he didn't hate Harry. Unless Draco knew that Harry was coming in here to yell at her. It isn't the first time Draco tried to protect her against her own friends, but she refuses to look into that more than she should. They were friends, her and Draco, at least she thought so. They might be lovers too, but they were friends.

"Oh, my God," Harry sounds excited and Hermione looks up in alarm. "Yes! Chocolate Frogs! Can I have one? I love these things, but you always have to eat them before they get all dirty--"

Harry's face lights up and he's grinning like mad as he rambles on, and she thinks maybe Harry hasn't changed that much after all. She smiles when the frog jumps from his grasp, laughs when he jumps on her bed to catch it and promptly falls off, and laughs so hard the healer comes in when he starts running around the room in a futile attempt to catch it.

He holds it up to her with a grin and she claps sarcastically, laughing, ignoring the pain searing into her side. Because she needs this right now, as much as he needs her now too.

Day: 1453; Hour: 7

Harry brought her a new change of clothes, but her boots are still blood and mud splattered. She thinks she should wash them, but she likes them like that, in a strange way that she wouldn't admit to other people. After three days of being at St.

Mungo's in a dull haze of reunions and pain potions, she grew a little comfortable. She slept a lot, she didn't have to worry about too much, and every time she demanded they let her out they would dose her up again.

Her boots reminded her of business. They reminded her of the last time she wore them, of missions, of death, of war. Of finding Ron. So she doesn't wash them but ties them up tight, and washes her hands when they stain bronze from the laces.

Lavender had been in shortly after Harry left yesterday, her eyes shining tears of gratitude, and Hermione had hugged her tight enough for the girl to gasp for breath when they pulled apart. Harold had come with her, creepy grin still attached, and she was pretty sure Dean Thomas was somewhere in the haze of faces. She isn't really sure on anything though, because she also recalls Neville smiling down at her, and it takes her hours to knock the thought out of her head that he wasn't really dead.

She remembers Draco, though she doesn't know if it was a dream - she had woken up for perhaps two seconds, muttered something about pain potions, and fallen back asleep again. At the time she had been having the greatest little girl dream of dancing with faeries, and she knew she must have been completely high.

Her leg is healed and her skin shows no evidence of the burns - all the wonders of magic medicine. They had also taken care of the wounds on her back. The healer had asked her later if she wanted him to get rid of her scars; she had a small collection from her childhood and the war, the most noticeable being the small dash across her cheekbone and the long one down her shoulder. Hermione had replied in the negative before she even thought about it.

Not that she didn't have enough reminders of war inside her head, or in the cemetery, or in the world they would have to rebuild. But it felt like she...earned them. Like they were the badges she carries from the years she fought. It is a reminder to herself - this is what I gave. She is proud of them in a way that she isn't sure would make sense to other people. Then again, maybe it would; Draco still has his, and she has seen scars on even Lavender, a girl who used to hold the blemish-free smoothness of her skin in high regard.

"Ready to go?"

Hermione's head jerks up toward the voice, the signed release form crinkling in her hand. Yes, she has grown too comfortable. "Who are you?"

They're both wearing Auror uniforms, but she doesn't like the fact that their

wands are out and in the hands at their side. She doesn't get hers back until she's released. "Auror Davids, Auror Finnegan. We're here to escort you."

"Escort me? I'm quite capable of handling myself." This is true.

"By order of the Advance Guard."

Hermione raises an eyebrow and stands. "Lupin?"

They don't reply and so she sighs, walking out of the room and hearing their feet fall in time with hers behind her. Auror Stiffs, Draco calls them, the ones who look, walk, and act like robots. She doesn't know if they even eat if it's not an order. She hands the release form to the woman behind the counter, only managing a weak smile, her thoughts too busy with the upcoming meeting with Lupin.

"That's my wand." Hermione points at the Auror, as if he didn't already know this.

"By order of--"

"You will return my wand to me immediately." That was her life, for all serious purposes.

One of them, Davids she is guessing from the lack of red hair, hands her a parchment. She glances at Lupin's familiar scrawl, the order to retrieve her, escort her to MH19, and confiscate her wand. The stamp of the Order is raised against her thumb. She thrusts it back toward him with a glare, her boots clicking angrily toward the Apparition point.

She's overwhelmed with flashes of light the moment she turns the corner. Hermione pauses, blinking in the bursts of white and red that take over her vision, and the two Aurors grab her arms to keep her moving. Cameras, in lines down either side of the corridor toward the Apparition lobby, two lines of chattering people held back by steel barriers.

"Miss Granger! Miss Granger, is there any word on Ron Weasley?"

"Miss Granger, are you here on a visit or were you injured?"

"How were you injured?"

"How is Harry Potter?"

"There are reports that Harry Potter is undergoing treatment for--"

"Is Harry--"

"Does Ron--"

"Have you--"

Hermione is overwhelmed, and she is sure there are going to be several unflattering pictures of her gaping and blinking. The press hasn't been something she had to deal with all war, and she never really thought she would have to. The press, to her, was dragged down to an old newspaper she might find every couple months. It certainly isn't rows of cameras and reporters attacking her with their lights and questions. Did they know how trivial it all was? Did they have any idea beyond the list of casualties or their pages of obituaries?

"Hermione, a few questions!"

"Does Harry have anyone special in his life? Are you someone special--"

"Have you found Ron?"

"Draco Malfoy's involvement-"

"Remus Lupin and--"

"Hermione, do you think--"

Hermione stares straight ahead at the wall as one Auror releases her arm, and the other holds tighter. She goes from chaos to silence in a second. The Malfoy Manor climbs the sky in front of her, and nine people hold their wands aimed at her. For a brief moment she thinks Lupin has lost the plot and put her against an execution line.

The line of Aurors keep their wands aimed as Davids approaches them, the order he had shown her back in his hand. A burly woman with a hard face takes the parchment and examines it more thoroughly than Hermione did. "Cleared."

The nine of them turn as if by strings, and she watches them dismantle the wards. "This is new."

The Aurors don't answer her, but she doesn't expect them to. She waits until the

gate opens before pulling her arm away from Finnegan and starting up the deep hill that leads to the Manor. She had been wondering what MH19 stood for. They had always just called it the Manor. Or, from some, The Place Where Evil Still Dwells, but that was a little too dramatic for her.

They show the order again at the door and Hermione walks inside to a tomb of silence. She follows Auror Finnigan up two flights of stairs, down a winding corridor, and to a blue door. She looks at them expectantly when they stop in front of it.

"My wand?"

"The Advance Guard has ordered its possession." Davids spoke gruffly, raising a fist to knock on the door.

Hermione can feel the magic pulse toward her as Justin opens the door. She can only read his lips when he asks if she has her wand on her. She shakes her head and he opens the door wider, inviting her in. The magical barrier in the doorway tingles over her skin as she walks past it. The Aurors have turned their backs toward her but remain stiff and guarding. Hermione closes the door and wonders if Lupin knows just how unnecessary it all was.

"Welcome to the new headquarters."

"What happened to Grimmauld?" Hermione asks, looking at the table in front of her. Draco, Lavender, Seamus, and Justin sat around it, and she knew what this had to be about.

"Compromised." It isn't the first time. "With the amount of prisoners they have taken, and the fact that Grimmauld is located in a Muggle community--"

"It's back to using the Manor as the headquarter." Hermione nods, finishing Seamus's sentence.

They could use more magic to protect the Manor since it wasn't going to have any impact on Muggle neighbors. Grimmauld had been abandoned by them several times, and when the heat would leave the Muggle neighborhood, they would go back to reclaim it. The Death Eaters already knew about the Manor, but it was a force of resistance. They would know the Death Eaters were there before they even passed the gate, and there was no chance in harming innocents - at least, the citizens they called "the innocents".

"So, what is Lupin going to slap us with, you think? A..." Justin trails off as the

door opens and Minerva McGonagall enters the room. "Shoot."

McGonagall rounded the table, coming to stop at the front of it, and drops five folders down with a sigh. "You could all face criminal charges for abandonment. You're lawfully and magically bound to the Order until the Oath is broken upon your resignation. While all members of the Order have the right to resign at any time, none of you contacted the Advance Guard to--"

"We didn't want to resign." Lavender still hasn't learned not to interrupt their old professor. "We were still doing a pretty good job of--"

"It was not an authorized mission, but we were on Order business." Draco cuts in smoothly, still far too relaxed for a disciplinary meeting, his legs outstretched under the table as he leans back in the chair. "Despite that it was unauthorized, we followed protocol, rescued prisoners, and sent back Death Eaters."

"Which is the only thing that saved you in the eyes of the Ministry," McGonagall snaps, angry for the interruption, and the whole reason they were there. "However, this is Order business and will be treated as such. I strongly doubt that the two Ministry Aurors who accompanied you will be reprimanded so...delicately. Have you turned in your reports? Except Miss Granger."

"Yes."

"Hermione, you will give your report to Lupin, in his office, after this meeting."

"Alright," Hermione nods, and blushes under the heavy eyes of the older woman.

Minerva McGonagall has seemed to age another twenty years during the war. Hermione feels an odd sort of shame to look at her. Perhaps if the younger generation had been better, stronger, than maybe an older woman could have found more rest. But Hermione knows that Minerva was the Head of Gryffindor for a reason - she could have never let the war go on without her.

"As my former pupils, I expected as much from some of you. I had been hoping that time brought better choices, but I am disappointed. However, though your self-made mission was a stupid one, it was also effective. Besides the major law you all broke, you did follow the Order's guidelines, captured several Death Eaters, and rescued many prisoners.

"We would still suspend you, but your infraction has come at a critical time when all of you are needed. For that, we are letting you go with a warning. Do keep in

mind that if any of you are in violation of the rules of the Order again your punishment will be worse than seems fair for the violation, and you will also have your wands confiscated for three months. Do you all understand?"

"Yes," is the breath of relief that circles the room.

"That said," Minerva swept the folders back into her arms and nods at them. "I am happy to know you have all made it back alive. Also...well done."

Day: 1453; Hour: 9

Lupin gives her a severe look the entire time she recounts the events for the report. She avoids his eyes and watches the quill as it speeds along the parchment to record her words. She stands when he places it inside her folder, still not speaking, but when she turns to leave she is pulled back and into his arms. The hug is short, and she'll never make out what he mumbles over her head no matter how often she thinks about it, but the severe look is gone when she leaves his office.

Day: 1453; Hour: 14

"I'm surprised you got over it so quickly." Harry doesn't look up from whatever he's scribbling at her words.

"I forgave you the moment you came back alive, really..." Harry pauses and she can see "Ginny" written at the top of the parchment. "Lupin was *livid*. I figured I should go a little easy on you since I *thought* he wouldn't. Public service, really."

"Oh, Harry. You loyal public servant and hero." She plays, his hand pausing and he looks up at her then, a strange smile twisting his lips.

"You've been hanging out with Malfoy too much. Look! You even have that weird smirk going on!" He points and laughs. "It's really *creeping* me out, stop. No, really... No, stop."

She laughs.

Twenty-Six

Day: 1453; Hour: 17

Draco is standing in the lobby, hands shoved in his pockets, his eyes glazed over, but firm on the staircase. His pants are a little too tight and a little too high on his ankles, his shirt painted onto his shoulders and just reaching the top of his pants. He looks ridiculous, but the clothes look expensive and she knows they are from a world he left behind.

She knows what he's thinking, because it's not hard to guess. He grew up in this house that had been a home, that is now used as the "other side's" headquarters. He probably spent his first night of life here, had his first cut, learned how to fly and practiced spells before Hogwarts. He celebrated holidays, had family dinners and birthday parties, spent school holidays here. It had been his home the same as she had hers, in a different place, in another world. She knows he is thinking of this, of his past, of memories only the walls and him can remember.

"Do you know when they are bringing our trunks back from the safe house?" he asks suddenly, his face shuttering, and his eyes dropping toward his socks, one black and the other blue.

She jumps and tries to play it off like she just saw him. "Oh. Um...I think someone just left to get them, actually."

"Hm."

"What happened to the clothes you were wearing before?"

He looks up at her then, blowing the fringe off his eyes. She tries to see the boy who lived here standing in front of her, but she can't anymore. "I burned them. I couldn't get the blood out."

Day: 1454; Hour: 6

"We were able to get at some of them because they were fractured - there was no leader, they were lost. They are reorganizing now, and it's not going to be so easy anymore. They know their hideouts and safe havens have been compromised from the Death Eaters we have captured, so they are forming new ones." Auror Wright throws a packet down on the table and steps back as Lupin steps forward.

"There have been some recent Death Eater captures that have given us new locations, but they have formed a new circle of leaders that are the only ones to know all the new places they have taken over. Some of the locations you'll be going to are old, likely abandoned, but the Dark are known to leave their captures behind if they aren't of use anymore."

"Will we be acting on the old or the new locations first?" Ginny asks. She hasn't looked at Hermione once since she entered the room, though Hermione kept finding her own eyes staring at the redhead.

"Both - the old locations and the new ones that seem temporary. They could leave the short-term hideouts at any time, and any prisoners left in the old ones can die at any time, so speed is vital. You'll work from the information we have on time schedules. First, you'll go to the places that have been abandoned the longest, and the locations that they have taken residence in for too long not to be moving on soon."

"What about the new locations that they have--"

"We don't know the location of their new headquarters, or where they have taken up root. That is someone else's mission - this is yours." Wright interrupted Lavender and slides two large packets to Draco and a man she doesn't know. "Malfoy and Rogers will be planning the mission executions. Malfoy, Rogers, and Potter are in charge of this team. Those are your orders."

Lupin passes out a sheet of parchment to each one of them, covering what was already said in the meeting but in more technical wording. Hermione signs the bottom without reading it and passes it back. In the beginning she had read each one she was handed, but it only took her four months to break the habit. She wonders how thick her folder is with those sheets of parchment.

"The three of you will meet in the Room of the Advance Guard for further briefing. The rest of you are dismissed - prepare your belongings, you will be leaving tonight."

Hermione tries to follow Ginny, but a hand on her arm pulls her back. Harry doesn't let go until they have walked so many turns and corridors she doesn't know if she'll find her way back. "I've been keeping something from you. I just...didn't know when the time was right."

He lets go of her arm and Hermione blinks at him, taking a step back as if to protect herself. This really had no possibility of being good news. "Now would be the right time, if it's that important Harry."

"Fred and Percy have… They were killed in that battle, Hermione."

"What?" Her voice is too faint, her vision goes hazy, and some far corner of her brain processes that Harry looks as if he might spring at her.

"I…" He chokes on spit, or the tears he forces back, but his hand trembles against her cheek when he wipes her tears away. "Arthur is in a coma. George refuses to come out of his room, they even have to feed him by…magical means. He doesn't know about Ron yet."

"Oh, God." Hermione feels sadness drag her down until she is dead weight in the arms of Harry's hug. "Oh, God."

Day: 1454; Hour: 8

"Molly is taking care of George and Arthur. Bill and Charlie are on missions for the Order. Ginny requested she be in this one. Lupin offered them all to take a break, to wait out the rest of the war, but they wouldn't take it. Except George but…he hasn't spoken since. And Molly, but just for now, she said. I think Lupin knows that if one more tragedy hits them, it might just…"

Hermione woke up to find herself sleeping in a bed with no idea how she got there, Harry's forehead on hers. He had woken up when she went to remove his glasses, and they had laid in silence until he decided to give some more details.

"You're taking this fairly well, Hermione. I mean… I thought you might still be…after you woke up."

"This war has taken a lot from me. It's not going to take my ability to fight. There's still a job to do." He gives her a look that makes her very uncomfortable, so she rushes on. "I do grieve, Harry. I give myself some time for that. But there's not a lot of personal time to be had, and so I don't *mourn*. Do you understand? I can't right now. Not when what they died for isn't done yet."

He is quiet as she stands, fixing her hair on top of her head and breathing in deep to clear the heaviness in her chest. "You've changed. You used to be a lot more…emotional."

"We all have," she shrugs. "It's human nature to adapt to your environment."

"But what happens after we're done fighting, Hermione? When you can't distance yourself from the truth anymore, and the cemetery is--"

"Someone told me once that we can't wait for the fallout. Because there are a lot of fallouts, Harry, and we don't know what's going to happen, but we just sort of... We have to survive. We keep going. If you're in a car one day and it crashes--"

"What does this have to do with a car? This has to do with friends, your friends, *our* friends who are dead and--"

"I--"

"--aren't coming back. Ever. Not ever again. You can't keep pretending--"

"I know they are dead, Harry!" She forces the ball back down, blinks the tears away, clenches her fist so they are no longer hands that shake. "But they are dead for a reason. Tonight, I might be dead for a reason. And that reason is not so I can sit in this room and cry for a year, and hate-- The reason is to find Ron. To make sure Harry Potter kills Voldemort. To secure the future. To save our world. I'm going to let them rest in peace, Harry. And I'm going to fight until we have it too."

Day: 1454; Hour: 12

His room is simple. She had sort of been prepared for a black dungeon with some cage where his pet snakes would have been. But it's large, white, one green wall, pictures, touches of green and silver from when their Houses still defined them. Maybe they still do.

His bed is too hard, for him at least, and she knows this because she has spotted him trying out the softness of mattresses in new safe houses when he didn't think she noticed. But it doesn't take long until she doesn't feel it under her back, until she can't see anything in the room but him. She almost wants to laugh afterward, lying there in his bed with the sheets sticking to her sweaty skin. Not because it's funny, but because of the absurdity of it all. It is the room he spent most of his life in, outside of Hogwarts. The room he once hated her in, the bed in which he dreamed of a future with the Death Eaters. The speed of change was absurd. But maybe it hadn't come that fast at all.

There's a picture of his parents across the room, sitting endlessly on a bench in the backyard. A group of Slytherins, including him with his hair slicked back, chasing a rogue snitch around their common room. Him and Pansy, their arms around each other's shoulders, grinning madly and raising up drinks they were *just* too young to be having. Another is knocked over, the picture hidden against the wood of the shelf, and she longs to turn it over.

These are reminders of who Draco Malfoy was. She forgets that a lot now, and only remembers who he became. She doesn't think that's such a bad thing anymore.

She thinks of the last time he looked around this room, thinking it was the last time he would. Of how scared he must have been before he left, and she squeezes him tighter now, because maybe he is still scared. He lifts his head at that, off her shoulder, and his breath is cool against the heat of her ear.

"There's a small Muggle village in Northern Ireland…Broomhedge, southwest of Belfast. There's a small postal office. Locker 9, code 5863. If anything were to happen to me, I have a favor to ask, Granger." He pauses, and she realizes that she's holding her breath. "Hermione."

"Of course."

"There's a key in my trunk to a vault at Gringotts. You are the only person beside myself that is cleared there to use that key. Inside, there is a box. It only opens with my fingerprint, so let's hope I don't burn to death. The box holds a Portkey to where my mother is, and you will give her the contents of the locker. No one is to know she is alive, Hermione. It was my mistake not to burn that letter, but the secret does not go beyond you. Understand?"

"Yes."

"You'll do that?"

"I promise." She breathes out the words, because her state of shock over his trust is too great to form harder sounds.

He pauses, lifts his head, and the hardness of his eyes does not fit with the softness of his mouth. "Thank you."

Day: 1454; Hour: 14

Hermione has to wander, making sure to look like she knows where she's going, before she can find where she left her trunk. Draco had grabbed her rather abruptly when she had been dragging it toward the lobby. She feels a little too self-important at the moment, but she knows that Draco's trust is a very hard thing to earn. It makes her feel the actual progress between them instead of having to look back to see it.

She had been curious as to why he hadn't just said the address, but Draco was too

paranoid. If she were captured, he would blame himself. Knowing him, he might have even erased the knowledge from his own head. No matter how much more complicated it would be though, if it came to it, she would do it. She just prayed it never would come to it.

All the same, Hermione is about to do a Very Girl-y Thing. He would probably hate it, but she couldn't resist doing it once it was in her head just in case he didn't. She wanted him to get the significance to it, and she can only hope that he didn't think it was some strange I-think-I'm-more-important-to-you-than-I-am sort of thing, especially after the information he shared with her. It was just that she had looked at his photographs, and she hadn't been able to stop thinking of what *he* thought when he stood in the room. If he couldn't get the memories of who he was and his mistakes out of his head.

She had a heated debate with herself over which one to choose on the way to her trunk, and had reached a decision halfway back to his room. He is gone, the thin excuse disappearing from her head as she walks quickly toward the shelf. She resists the urge to peek at the picture in the down-turned frame, and leans another against two frames so it can be seen.

It's a Muggle photograph, captured by someone she can't remember. Neville is sitting at a table and grinning, his hands over his red face. Draco and Hermione stand with her shoulder leaning into his arm, Draco full out laughing and looking at Neville with Hermione laughing so hard her eyes are squeezed shut. The background is a safe house, the background is war, but the picture doesn't show it.

She has loved the picture since the moment she saw it, and it's one of her absolute favorites. She hopes she can get a copy of it later, and that he doesn't throw it out. She hopes he understands what she means to say.

Day: 1454; Hour: 16

Hermione can't help but stare at him when he looks at such a loss for what to do. It's almost like she has to remember that this isn't normal for Harry. She knows he has seen his own side of the war, but not theirs. And it's such a simple thing, the way they all drag their trunks into the lobby, sit on top of them, with one hand reaching for the Portkey and the other secured at the handle of the trunk. It's just a routine, the best way to Portkey somewhere with their luggage, but Harry, Ginny, and a young man she doesn't know stand awkwardly staring at them.

"Hurry up," Rogers barks, and then they move, dropping their trunks and following the example. Harry looks flushed. She stares the whole time.

Rogers is in motion before Hermione can even notice where they are. The dreaded white house she hates so much, enough to not care about the water she and Draco flooded it with...God, whenever that was. It felt like a decade, maybe. She's surprised to find another painting next to her own, above the closed in fireplace. It's a tree from another safe house, the one that lights up like gold in the spring, and somehow she knows it's from Dean.

"Malfoy and I have already laid out the plans for tonight. I know some of you are new," he only looks at the young guy standing in awe next to Harry, "so I'm going to give a crash course before I get to the mission tonight."

Rogers ran over the meaning behind the flare colors, the heat of the coin they carried, and other basics. Hermione watches Draco draw lines and symbols on a large sheet of parchment he hangs on the wall. She finds another painting, a sunrise or sunset over a field - sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

"What?" Harry whispers back.

"You look uncomfortable."

"I'm not used to this."

"Following Draco's plan?"

"I haven't before, but I've worked with him, and I've heard about it. It's not that."

She stops herself from telling him it's the same thing, because she doesn't think it is. Harry hasn't worked with many "normal" fighters, from what she's heard. Top Aurors and members of the Advance Guard mostly. He had been pulled out of this because it was too dangerous, because his life was at too much of a risk before he killed Voldemort. She had a feeling he was used to fairly dangerous missions, but relatively safe ones. Not ones where the new kids threw up all over your shoes and no matter how well planned things almost always went wrong.

He would be fine though - he is a very skilled wizard. And... "I'm here."

He smiles at her and looks to Draco as the blond turns toward them to lie out the plans. "I know."

Day: 1455; Hour: 1

Hermione had been on Harry's team all night. It felt off, and as strange as it was to admit, she didn't know if she liked it. Nearly every mission she was a part of with Draco where they had to split up, she was with him. She had grown used to it, and in a life that did not allow routine she liked it where she could find it. In the first and second locations Harry had to grab her arm to follow him, because she always stepped after the flash of blond on instinct.

"Cleared," she whispers over to Harry, Justin, and the new kid. They nod their agreement.

"Hermione, Simon, go upstairs to make sure the other team is cleared. Justin and I will search the rooms for any infor--"

"You're splitting us up?" Hermione cuts him off, surprised.

"Yes," Harry says this slowly, as if he doubts her metal stability.

"We don't split up." Not unless there was an emergency, or the ground was too big to cover while staying in teams. Rare cases. Not anything else.

"Hermione, this place is probably empty, just like the first two--"

"You're going on-"

"Hermione," Justin whispers, and nods his head to where Simon has taken off up the staircase without her. She makes an aggravated noise and follows after him quickly.

Perhaps the thing she had wanted for so long in the beginning, to fight with Harry, was going to take a lot of adjusting to.

Day: 1455; Hour: 6

"Just like old times," Lavender sighs about the mission, sliding a plate of the pancakes she cooked to the middle of the table.

"Indeed," Seamus mutters, looking skeptically at the food.

Justin pokes his fork at them gingerly, showing the middle raw. "Some things just don't get better with time."

"Why are we ending the day with pancakes?"

"Because it's morning."

Day: 1455; Hour: 8

There are five bedrooms and twelve of them. Three of the rooms only have one bed, and those are shared by Harry and Ginny, Lavender and Angelina, and Draco has the other to himself. Rogers and an Auror who only goes by "Tim" share a room, Auror Fitz and Justin in another. Seamus originally was sharing with Fitz, but backed out before sleep for a reason she didn't know.

"Why aren't you sleeping in Malfoy's room?" Seamus sounds aggravated, and this is probably because he is sleeping on the floor and she is on the couch.

She had been wondering the same thing, with the bar pressing into her ribs and the cushions threatening escape. She thought it would be awkward if Harry saw her disappear into Draco's room, but it was too late for secrets and she didn't want to think she was still at the point where she cared. Mostly, she didn't know how Draco would take it. She is too tired for sex, and one night of just sleeping beside him hardly meant she could form a habit.

She doesn't know if she will ever know the rules between her and Draco. She couldn't deny that she was a coward, sometimes, when it came to this thing between them. But she doesn't know where the lines exactly were with them, so it is usually best to avoid the general area. She knows how fast he can shut down and turn away, and she didn't want to deal with it.

"Go to sleep, Seamus. I'm sure we'll come up with a plan to take turns with the sleeping arrangements."

"I hope so," Simon grumbles from the floor.

"Shut up, new kid. It's not like--"

"I don't know what-"

"If you two don't go to bed, I swear to God..."

"I could go to bed, if I *had* a bed."

Hermione groans and pulls her blanket over her head.

Day: 1456; Hour: 13

"You look...lovely this morning."

"Shut. Up. Harry." Hermione bites, and points at Draco when she finds him staring at her. "You too."

He raises an eyebrow at her and reaches up to grab the sugar bowl off the top of the fridge where he had shoved it back too far for her to reach. And she knows it was him because he's the only one who does it. Beside herself, but just because she knows he'll put it back up there again if she doesn't.

She grumbles the afternoon away.

Day: 1456; Hour: 1

"Do you have a problem with being on my team?"

"What?" Hermione asks, chopping at the bush that just smacked her in the face. With the bickering between Seamus and Simon, the sunlight streaming into shade and curtain-less windows, and the terror that was the couch, she is going on little more than an hour of sleep. Lack of sleep is something she is used to, but lack of sleep with the deadly mood swings that come before her monthly add up to something lethal.

"Last night, that first house tonight... You always try to go off in a different direction. I realized tonight that you always try to follow Malfoy."

"I'm sorry, Harry. I'm just used to being on his team when we're on the same mission. I mean, I get paired up with other people sometimes but... I don't know, I'm sorry."

"So you're okay with being on my team?"

"Of course you prat, I've--"

"Just checking." Harry grins, throwing an arm over her shoulder. "How much longer are we walking?"

"Another thirty minutes or so, by the map."

"Do they really test for magic this far out?" He frowns, dropping his arm as they climb over or under a fallen tree.

"We took a chance taking the Portkey as close as we did, actually. There--" She cuts herself off and blushes, spotting ten faces waiting for them at the bottom of a hill. It has been a long time since she lagged behind so much.

"What is Rogers doing with his hand?"

"No more talking." Hermione whispers, and it's an answer though he might not know. It serves the purpose though, and they both fall silent.

Day: 1456; Hour: 7

"I meant *everyone* will work out rotating the sleeping arrangements, *not* just me."

"Well *everyone* thinks they have ownership over their more comfortable arrangements, and so no one wants to *rotate* except the "unlucky sods" as that basta--"

"I am not playing rock, paper, scissors for the couch."

This argument lasts for the span of three minutes until Hermione yanks her blanket out from under Seamus and *accidentally* hits him in the face with her pillow. She feels a bit like a child as she marches down the hall, tripping over her blanket, but she is as petulant as one at the moment. He answers on the fourth rap of her knuckles on the door.

"Either I'm sleeping in there or you're cuddling up to Simon and hoping Seamus doesn't kill you in your sleep."

He lifts an eyebrow at her, and she can see the hint of a smirk as he drawls. "Choices, choices, Granger."

She lowers her nose from the air when he opens the door wider and walks back into the room. She had been trying to ignore the possibility of him closing the door in her face, but the knot of nervous tension in her gut refused to, so it is still relief she feels when she steps inside. He sits down in the corner of the room, his back to the wall, and paper spread out all around him.

"Planning?"

"Rogers insists that everyone receive maps of the locations before we leave for them. I told him he can do it himself than, but he's left."

"The mission?"

Draco looks up at her, his forehead wrinkled from the rise of his eyebrows, and he scratches his temple with the end of his pen. "He had a meeting at Headquarters. I'm unaware if he'll be back."

So there is another bed open. She'll save the information and if Rogers isn't back tomorrow, maybe she'll tell Simon. Seamus could keep the couch. Because she doesn't know what else to say, "I see."

"Do you want to be put on tomorrow or do you need a break?" This has to be the first time anyone has ever asked her this during the entire war.

"Did I hear that right?"

"Potter, Finnigan, Fitz, Johnson, Weasley, and..." He flips a paper, "Simon? I thought it was his first name. I'm either sending you or Brown with them, and I'll go as well if Rogers is back. The rest will be on call for backup until the third location. The first two are small - a cottage and a flat, both in the Muggle world. There's little chance of needing everyone, and sending a dozen people in will look too suspicious for the Muggles. Do you want half the night off or no?"

He's probably aware of what her recent mood swings mean, because he's been around her enough to know, and also that they precede her avoiding sex for a few days. She isn't sure if she should feel embarrassed about it but she doesn't. "I'll go the whole night."

"You should get some sleep in that case, Granger. I'm sure Potter doesn't need you attacking more shrubbery tomorrow."

She glares at him. "It had thorns on it, it was attached to my clothes."

He gives a slow smile to the blue marker lines in front of him, and she huffs her way to the bed. "Can you not use that blanket? It's scratchy."

"I have to. You're a blanket hog."

He blinks at her, a confused expression on his face, and she smiles because it's adorable. "I am not."

"How do you know? You're sleeping."

"Because if I use a blanket at all, I usually end up throwing it off me. Why would I hog the blankets when I don't like them?" This is completely true.

"Fine." She just happens to *like* her scratchy blanket.

"Go to bed, Granger. Your arguments are weaker than usual."

"So is your...screw it."

Day: 1456: Hour: 15

It is dark when she wakes up; this is usual. Draco's chest is to her back, his hand under her shirt, his fingers spread across her stomach; this she rather likes. She can feel a hardness at the small of her back, and when she pushes closer, he exhales harder at the top of her head. It is surprisingly intimate, and as she begins to think of just how she wants to wake up this morning, she remembers that there was a different reason as to why she is awake at all. Something...alarming.

She feels the lull of sleep dragging her deeper before she breathes in deeply and is back to being aware. Smoke, or fire, or *burning*. She and Draco jolt to sitting positions at the same time, no longer than two seconds after the shrill scream from outside their door.

He beats her to the door, and she presses her back to the side of it as he gives her the warning look that he's going to open it. The moment he does, she aims to the left and him to the right, but there's no one there. She heads toward the living room and Draco heads right down the hall. Seamus and Simon appear in front of her, sleep-tousled and wands raised.

"Cleared."

"Cleared!" Angelina yells from the top of the stairs.

"Fire!" Someone else yells from the direction of the kitchen.

"It's only in the rubbish bin, get a pot of water you dramatic--" She can hear Draco begin, but Lavender cuts off her hearing.

"Shit! I thought I put that out!" Lavender is pounding down the steps, face red and hair matted.

"The fire?" Seamus is as confused as the rest of them.

"You were smoking." Hermione accuses, taking in how distraught the other woman is. She has only seen her like this for one reason. For however creepy Hermione found Harold, Lavender couldn't go very long without the man.

"Oh, smoking? *Great*! So it's not enough that we go and put our lives on the line every day, *you've* got to try and kill us--" Seamus starts what is only going to turn into a long-winded rant.

"Shut *up*

"All taken care of?" Hermione asks from the doorway of the kitchen, and is forced to stumble in when someone slams into her back.

"What fire?" Fitz looks around wildly.

"It was in the rubbish bin. Justin is stomping the last of it out. An--"

"Good job, Lav. Throw a lit cigarette in ther--"

"I thought it was out all the way!"

"Thankfully there's a hose in the backyard," Draco glances at her, and she wonders if he's thinking about the time they used it on one another. "I suggest you get dressed in more than a nightie before you clean it all up, Brown."

Hermione doesn't see Lavender's response, retreating toward Harry's room quickly as something pieces itself together in her mind. There are four women in the house, and unless Justin has a special talent of screaming like a female, someone was screaming for another reason. The only other female on the bottom floor is Ginny.

"Harry?"

"We're alright. Everything alright out there?"

"Yes. Is... Is Ginny alright?"

Hermione is paranoid, and paranoia leads her to a big imagination. All she can think as to why Harry isn't opening the door is because he can't. Is because something isn't letting him. Hermione learned a long time ago that the monsters in

her basement, in the cleaning cabinet, in all the places her mother did not want her to go as a child - they were real. They were very real, and they wear black hoods with ivory masks, and they all want to kill her.

"Open the door, Potter." Hermione jumps because he is right behind her and she hadn't even felt or heard a breath of movement.

Harry looks annoyed when he does, looking first at Draco above her head and then at her. "She had a nightmare, Hermione. She's fine."

"I just wanted to be sure."

"She can stay behin--" Draco starts.

"She won't stay behind - she'll go the whole night. She's fine, it's a nightmare, Malfoy. You can't tell me you haven't had one."

They both glare at one another until Harry shuts the door.

Twenty-Seven

Day: 1456; Hour: 20

"Something is wrong."

"What is?" Angelina whispers, though they have already cleared the cabin.

"I don't know," Harry mutters, his eyes tracking something only he can see in the light of their wands. "There's dust all over the place."

"I doubt they clean without their servants to do it for them." Seamus pokes at an old cloth on the table, covered in dust with black splotches of stains.

"No, I think you're right, Harry. They wouldn't be using magic for fear we could trace them in the Muggle world - so where are their light bulbs?" Hermione asks, the stream of light from her wand trained at the empty socket above their heads.

"Maybe they don't get electricity out here. Torches, candles--" Fitz starts.

"Then where are the torches and the candles? There is one mattress in all the rooms, and a chair in here. It's practically empty." Harry puts his light out suddenly. "Put out your wands."

"Harry--" Ginny starts.

"This place is a setup."

"There's no one here though--" Simon starts.

"Shut up," Hermione whispers, putting out her wand as well. "Sorry."

She didn't mean to snap at him, but the bad feeling that had started tingling at the bottom of her spine has now become The Very Bad Feeling. Fear raised the hair along her arms, it sent her hearing to every squeak of the house, it waited anxiously for the others to plunge them into darkness. Simon is the last to extinguish his light, and it takes her eyes a couple seconds to adjust to the lighter shade of darkness out the window. A rush of panic hits the room, and whispers climb one another to form too much sound.

"Where's the map?"

"Can't see it without light."

"Find our location."

"No one is in here."

"Outside? We're surrounded by woods."

"Easy enough for them to hide."

"Where are the exits?"

"To wait, you mean."

"Do we…what are we doing?"

"Harry?"

"Portkey out?'

"Call for backup."

"We don't retreat."

"They won't know the plan."

"They will Apparate right in."

"*We* don't know the plan."

"We have a plan?"

"They can't Apparate, they have never been here."

"Open for attack."

"Harry?"

"Be quiet," Harry hisses, and she can hear the denim of his jeans as he moves.

"We can't stand here like fools. If they are waiting they would have seen the lights go out and they will know we're on to them." Fitz whispers this harshly, but Hermione had known before this that the man didn't agree with putting Harry in charge. She would like to tell him that Harry killed what was possibly the most powerful wizard alive, after Dumbledore's death. She would like to ask Fitz if he knew what that meant, what that made Harry now.

"They would have been waiting in here--" Harry tries.

"So you've got us all freaked out over nothing?" Seamus says this in a way that reminds her too much of Draco. The redhead would probably strangle her if she said this out loud.

"I mean they are on their way if they aren't here already!" Harry snaps.

"So we take the exits? Windows, doors, we--" Hermione cuts herself off when someone brushes against her arm. Footsteps, quick and decisive.

"No, they will set the whole thing on fire. We're going to have to round the house-- Who is that?" Harry's voice became closer, and that is how she knows it's him that bangs shoulders with her as he runs by.

Hermione can see a flash of red in the moonlight as Ginny opens the front door, and then the orange of Harry's Phoenix band as he grabs her. A blue ball of magic tears across the darkness outside the window, lighting up Harry and Ginny as he kicks the door shut and slams both of them to the ground. The curse shatters the entire door, chunks and splinters of wood blowing into and over the couple on the floor.

"*Shit*!" someone screams behind her, but her adrenaline has already clogged her ears too much for her to distinguish the voice. She sprints toward the door, but Harry has already rolled the two of them out of the doorway before she's halfway there. The Killing Curse colors them all green before tearing a hole through the wall.

"Everyone out!" Harry screams, jumping to his feet. "Fitz, take the back, Seamus and Angelina, West. Hermione, Simon, East. Find the closest exit there, circle the house!"

Hermione turns for the right of the house as Harry pulls the coin out of his pocket. She can feel the heat roar to life in her packet as she throws open a window in the living room. She pushes herself up, Simon's hands slamming into the back of her

thighs hard enough for her knees to hit the wall as he shoves her out the window. She hits the ground, her breath leaving with a grunt as a curse flies over her and shatters the glass. It rains down on top of her as she rolls to her feet, shards slicing her palm, unaware if Simon is alive until he drops down next to her.

They are completely exposed. The Death Eaters blend into the woods around them, having a clear sight to them while remaining hidden. There is no cover, no protection, and Hermione feels like she might have just started running through a land mine - she might be okay for a couple of seconds, but something is going to blow her to pieces any moment now.

Disillusionment charms were useless, considering that the Death Eaters already knew where they were and would see them through it. She wishes she still had a Safe Kit. A small pack that contained some choice potions, including one that created invisibility for one minute and twenty-two seconds. But then the war started costing too much money, and Safe Kits were phased out after two months to compensate for the scarcity of hospital beds, potions, food, or even parchment. Aurors were also paid. Phoenixes died pro bono.

Hermione throws a blocking spell up as a yellow stream of light darts at them. The force of it hitting the shield sends her and Simon smashing back into the side of the house. "I thought Lupin said they would cast to kill?"

"They know they have us trapped. They want to play with us," Hermione rushes out. Simon stands stunned as she yells the Killing Curse, her wand aimed in the direction the spell had come from. "We're the trapped ones - we're casting to kill."

Simon still only yells out stunning and binding spells, and his wand shakes the entire time. Hermione does not blame him, despite that it is both their lives, because she remembers and she remembers too well. She would do it for the both of them, because Simon didn't *have* to remember. He didn't have to know what it felt like at all.

A ball of purple hits the house behind her almost an arms length from her shoulder. She mutters her thanks on her breath, because judging by the shot at least one of the Death Eaters is inexperienced. "Simon, I need you to Lumos them--"

She catches a flash of light from the corner of her eye just as Simon screams out. He hits his knees, but she doesn't have time to look over, throwing up another block as two ink-black spells come toward them. She almost misses them in the night, and if she still thought about such things in a duel, she would know that they would have hit had she moved a second later.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," and she knows he's tearing the words out through clenched teeth.

She sends out a string of spells meant to bind or injure them if they hit, but all she hears are trees cracking or falling, and she knows she's not hitting any of the Death Eaters. She tries desperately to remember what side of the woods they had came out of when they first arrived, because she can rationalize forgiving herself for killing the enemy, but she could never forgive herself if she killed an ally. Then, through the panic-driven fog of her memory comes something else. Hermione gasps as she remembers, yanking Simon's shirt as the Killing Curse flashes by so close to him it ruffles his hair.

He vomits under her arm as she casts the charm, grabbing his arm as he stumbles to his feet and running from the line of green blasts that follow them, *just* missing by fingers or hair width. Her heart is hammering out that tortured, mad beat that will always remind her of this war, and Simon throws them both to the ground when she trips over her feet.

"Don't breathe," and the compact sound of his voice suggests he's not. "Smoke."

"I put it there, breathe!" Hermione whispers, and realizes that she sounds too scared. She pushes herself up but remains crouching, looking at the thick dark grey smoke all around them.

"What?"

"Sh. They can't see us now, they are going to have to come out. Don't speak, just listen. Be quick." Hermione whispers this so low that she's not even sure if he can hear her.

She knows she has caused a situation she always hated to find herself in. In those, the smoke was there from so many spells used in the thickness of a big battle. Now she had created it herself, along with the inability to know if the sounds are friend or foe. With Simon shaking against her arm, she can remember a fear more wild in her than the one now, and had it been a different situation she might have found herself apologetic.

The Killing Curse jets through the smoke and into the house, far from where they are now. Hermione yells it back, her hand white-knuckled on her wand, and her grip remains tight even after the clunk of a body falling. She can't look at Simon, afraid of the accusation she might find in his eyes, the same look she had given Draco

years ago. She grabs him instead but he yanks his arm away, both of them running to dodge the spells that come soaring at them. Both of them cast Stunning spells in the right directions.

She can hear the rocks and twigs under their feet, but doesn't know if anyone else can. There are screams coming from all around the house, and then the popping of a flare, though she can't see through the smoke to know the color. Another begins popping somewhere else, and Hermione grunts loudly as she runs into something hard. A tree, judging by the bark that scratches her forehead. The collision brings her down, rocks crunching under her knees.

Simon tries to grab her but pulls back, letting out a low whine. Hermione just pulls a foot under her when something collides with the tree in front of her. She can feel chips of wood fly into her and branches smacking against branches as the top half of the tree begins to fall. She hurries to her feet, unaware of which way it's coming down, when something tears itself into her side.

Perhaps there were fighters out there who never made a sound. In the face of pain they bit it back, detached themselves, and stayed silent because silence meant they didn't give away their location. Hermione is not one of these fighters, and so she screams, jerking sideways as if she were yanking herself away from a hot burner. Because it is hot, it's fire hot, and it feels like it's tearing its way through all that precious, sensitive tissue that made up her insides. Her shoulder slams into the tree as she cradles her side, clenching her lips together so her scream turns into a whine. Simon is firing off Binding spells, his fingers wrapping themselves in her shirt as he jerks her away this time.

"Hermione?" Someone yells her name from far away, a woman's voice, high with fear. Green lights slice through in that direction and Hermione raises her wand toward one of the sources, but she coughs on her own spit when she tries to speak.

She doesn't know who would be stupid enough to call out, but she is praying they aren't dead from the choice. Simon continues yanking her further out of the world of grey until the smoke begins to thin. "Alright?"

Hermione's fear has turned to anger, which she grabs and cradles. Emotions create mistakes in a fight, but she had never learned to shut them out. Fear is common for her, but it made a person weaker. Anger makes her stronger, though reckless, but Hermione has had enough. "Get ready."

She ends the charm for the smoke, dropping her hand from her side and keeping her wand raised to the area in front of them. The moment she even thinks she can

make out darker shapes, she begins hurling out Stunning spells, and Simon follows the example. Her aim is shaky from the pain, but this is something Hermione has learned to control. She will not miss, because if she can see them, they can see her.

She casts over a dozen times, and Simon as well, but when the smoke has diminished to a light fog, there are only three bodies on the ground. Two are Death Eaters, the other marked by Ginny's long red hair. Ginny must have heard her scream, and Hermione starts forward with wide-eyes, remembering the Killing Curses that had chased the voice. Her leg locks though and she falls to her knee with a whimper. The top of her leg feels numb, and when she forces it to move despite the protesting muscles, pain seizes her whole body.

She pushes herself up and sits, using her arms to position her body toward the house, gaining a clear view to the left and the right. She could only hope no one else was going to show up from the woods. "Bind the--"

"They're dead."

"*What*?"

"Weasley is fine," he rushes, and revives her from the Stunning spell, looking at Hermione as if she might attack him. "The Death Eaters."

"Hermione! Hermione, are you alright?" Ginny gasps, rolling to her feet and running toward her.

"Gin, were you and Harry clear?" Hermione is speaking through her teeth, her insides raw.

"Yes, we were fine. Backup showed, there are Death Eaters at the other side of the house but--"

"We should go over there." She doesn't know if she can move.

"Hermione, you don't look well… They have it under control, trust me, or I wouldn't still be standing here. Malfoy even left with two of them we captured to take them in, and you know he wouldn't have gone had--" Ginny explains, but Hermione only stays where she is because she can hear someone laughing and another yell out that the area is cleared.

"These Death Eaters were firing up until you cleared the smoke, and we were casting Stunning spells, so we weren't the ones who killed them." Simon points as

Ginny tries to grab Hermione's arms. Hermione pushes her away as softly as possible, giving her a weak smile.

"Do you work for the Department of Mysteries?" Ginny snaps the question, looking too much like her mother for it not to be comforting. "They probably killed one another, because they knew we had them and they didn't want to give up information!"

"Why wouldn't they app--"

"Harry warded the area so no one could Apparate out. Hermione, you--"

"I think I need to Portkey to hospital." Hermione can't help but sound alarmed. The tearing sensation was now gone at her side, replaced by numbness. She is thankful for this despite that it can't be a good sign, especially since the tearing sensation remains along the outside of the numbed area, like it is...spreading. "I think something is wrong."

"Okay, yes, I'll tell everyone. Simon--"

"We have healing potions back at the safe shelter, don't we? I'll be fine with those, it's just a cut."

Hermione notices the blood on Simon's shirt for the first time as she reaches into her pocket. "You're sure."

"I'm fine." He's giving her a careful look that she doesn't understand until she sees him surveying her. She's not bleeding anywhere but her hands from the glass, and she knows what he's thinking and is instantly angry despite the lightness of her head that had been making her eerily calm. She wouldn't be the first to plead injury in order to get out of a mission, but she would never be among that number.

She doesn't say anything though, wrapping her fist around the Portkey. She yanks it out of her pocket, breathing in quick at the pull. Whatever curse she was hit with is spreading inside her, and she has no time for anything else.

"Love you."

Hermione's head jerks up toward Ginny at her words, blue eyes brimming with tears and Hermione breathes a laugh, but it hurts. "I'll be fine. I'm always fine."

Day: 1456: Hour: 23

Hermione Granger was not fine.

She didn't know how long she spent drifting in and out of consciousness, how long she spent screaming, how many potions they force fed her, spells they cast on her, or how close it actually came to death. Her mind was a blur of useless, half-formed thoughts. Healers busied themselves over her, keeping her awake for higher accuracy of effect on whatever they did. The faces changed, so did the colors; the pain remained the same.

She had grown increasingly incoherent, but there was a point she reached the edge. Where she felt as if something was sucking her through the bed, where the tearing inside her grew duller with her senses. She no longer noticed the pain, the people, the potion layered and sticky on her face from where it had been gurgled out from the force of a scream. Her hearing had shot down the yelling around her to a whisper, silence closing in, and she had *known*.

This is death, she had thought. *This is dying*. It felt as if something was stealing every part of her that formed who she was. It was robbing her of her mind, of her emotions, of the memories of her life. It was a greyness that was closing in, and there was no one there. Not Neville, Fred, Dumbledore to lead her somewhere. And there, at the end of her life, there wasn't a single face above hers to plead for her return. There was no voice inside her head, no flashback of her life, no staircase of angels who told her to climb.

There was nothing but the promise of losing everything. She had never felt so very alone, had never understood what alone *was* until she was dying in such a state. In the end it was not her friends or her family who hovered over her begging her to fight - it was herself.

Day: 1457; Hour: 20

She wakes up to the darkness of the hospital room. There is only silence.

Day: 1458; Hour: 14

There is a picture and a note on the table beside her bed. She, Lavender, and Neville are sitting on a couch laughing. Draco stands behind her, giving a horrified look toward the television. Dean, Seamus, and Colin are lying on the floor, pretending to gag. They had been watching a romantic movie at the time, and the reaction was after a serious love confession scene that had only come across as corny.

Malfoy told me to give this to you. I have better ones at my house, but I couldn't go back. Don't know why you would want it anyway, but... Sorry we couldn't stay. Orders. I don't want to know how close this was. I love you. See you soon, Harry, then attached in a different script, *and Us.*

Draco knew how it felt to come close to death. She wonders if he felt the same thing that only allowed her to sleep when dosed up with heavy pain potions. That overwhelming feeling of loneliness. Why else would he give her the picture, this moment of time frozen in laughter and friendship? Why else would he want her to remember?

She pushes the photograph to her chest.

Day: 1460; Hour: 10

There had been a storm last night. The world outside her window is wet, all deeper colors. Yesterday, there had been a set of four leaves hanging just outside her window, and now only one is left - somehow, the smallest one.

Hermione drops her eyes to the mattress, drags them slowly to the calendar, and then back out to the single leaf. *Four years,* she thinks, running her fingers over the hospital sheet. Her other hand is still clutching the photograph, still pressing it to her. Four years of her life, four years of a war. *It's just time,* Draco had told her days ago. *It feels like a decade. Numbers don't matter. It's just time.* But time is everything - time is their existence.

Four years, and it swells against her back like the impossible weight of an ocean.

Day: 1461; Hour: 15

She checks out on the fifth day. No matter how long she has lived in this world, magic still amazes her - she doesn't want there to be a time when it doesn't. The Dark curse she was hit with was burning her insides, shutting down her organs when it spread there. It took four specialists and five healers to stop it from reaching her heart, to force it away from her other organs and repair them. They stopped it from spreading that first night, but it took them two days to get it out, and another three to heal her completely. If she were in a Muggle hospital, she would have died no more than ten minutes after she showed up.

Hermione had come close to dying so many times she doesn't even know the number. The bad injuries, the bad situations, how often the Killing Curse *just* missed her. But a person never got used to almost dying. Some of the people she fought

beside had accepted the fact of their death - that they would likely never see the end of war. Draco was one of them. Hermione never could though, not even when she had *known* that first night. She still hadn't given up. When she thinks about it, she guesses that Draco couldn't either when it came down to it.

Draco had accepted his death, or at least the likelihood of his death, but he never accepted giving up on himself. That's why he still fought, even after he left behind his family and friends, even after Pansy died. He was fighting for himself. Hermione had killed people to stop herself from being killed, but she always fought for other people. The innocents, the future generation, her friends, her family, the dead.

That moment, that terrifying moment when she was sure of what was coming, she had fought for herself. It had not been her will to save others but the will to save herself that pulled her back from that ledge. She had abandoned the memory of her friends and family when she needed it the most. She didn't know if she would ever understand why. Perhaps, at the end of all things, it was the love of yourself and your own strength that forced you to keep pushing for life. When life, and what it was made of, begins to leave, you are only left with yourself.

She can't help but imagine the people she has lost. She can't help but still hope that at the end, when they found only themselves but didn't have a choice, that they might have remembered anyway. That in their heads they remembered the life that made them who they found themselves to be before death, and that they weren't so lonely. That they had memories to cradle them into the darkness of death, and that it was like the lull of a mother's constant heartbeat as they were rocked to sleep.

Day: 1461; Hour: 19

McGonagall makes her stay at Headquarters for a night - literally makes her stay, taking her wand and locking all Portkeys within her office. Hermione walks around the Manor until her feet are sloppy and her eyes are dragging down. Draco's bed smells like him, and she wonders how long it has been since he laid in it.

She can't sleep for an hour after she lies down, so she stares at his shelf instead. The frame that had been turned down is now gone. In its place is a new frame, facing the bed. She stares at the picture of them inside of it, the one she had left, until sleep finally claims her.

Day: 1462; Hour: 8

She wakes up to crying, and it's when her eyes clear enough to see Draco kneeling on the bed that she realizes it's coming from her. She brings her hands up so fast

that she smacks herself, quickly wiping the tears away. Draco continues staring down at her, stoic as ever.

"Sorry. I must have been dreaming." She is slightly horrified that she had been crying in her sleep. Also that he caught her in his bedroom, where there were several other places she was *supposed* to sleep.

He looks hesitant and then looks at the clock, the time making his decision for him. "Finnigan is in hospital, Simon is dead, Tim died the night you were injured, nearly as soon as we got there. Rogers is back. Do you want to visit Finnigan for the night or return to the mission tonight?"

Hermione takes several seconds to blink at him, trying to digest the information he just threw at her. "Simon," she whispers, and shakes her head sadly. "Is Seamus alright?"

"He should be able to return tomorrow."

"Since when do we get off to visit friends? Especially ones who aren't dying?"

"Well, I was trying to gloss over my questioning of your mental health, but since my doing so isn't anything new and since you only take subtlety as a brick to the head - are you *stable* enough to return tonight?"

"Yes," she snaps back, matching his glare.

"Then get up." He does as he says, sliding off the bed and to his feet.

She pauses, only as a childish way of showing him it's her own choice to get up when she does. Her eyes fall on the picture across the room again, but she looks away quickly so he doesn't notice. She doesn't want him to feel awkward about it, or to know how much it means to her that he not only kept it up, but also put it in a frame. It means more to her than it probably should.

"You might be the only person I know who can improve so much in fighting and still almost die nine out of ten times." He says this in such a quiet tone of voice, she almost forgets it's an insult.

"For such a serious person, you like to exaggerate a lot." She huffs and tries to pull the wrinkles out of her shirt, like it matters that they are there. She hates these clothes. She came a breath from dying in these clothes.

"If I exaggerate a lot - which is a lie - I don't exaggerate *by* a lot. And what does being serious have to do with exag--"

"How does that even make sense? It's the same thing."

"I didn't say it wasn't." He's still glaring at her when she looks up at him.

"What is that thing? People lie in conversation every ten sentences or something?"

"That wasn't a lie."

"I didn't say it was, it just made me think of that thing, so I thought to ask."

He's giving her a very hard look when she looks at him again, and he is slow to speak. "You should take another night, Gran--"

"I'm not taking a night."

"You--"

"I *need* this." Her voice is pleading, but he gets it. She knows he gets it, and maybe he's been there before, but he knows what she's saying.

"Alright." He pauses, studying his hand before he throws a box at her, a phoenix stamped on the front to tell her it was a Portkey inside. "I'm surprised it let you walk away."

"What?"

"Death. It's had it out for you pretty bad since the beginning of the war, especially with… I'm surprised it let you walk away."

"It didn't have a choice," Hermione sniffs.

"Against Hermione Granger? Nose in the air, finger jabs and all? No, it didn't. I guess I'm not that surprised after all." He grins lopsided at her, and that well of loneliness and fear recedes to some place too deep for her to find now.

Day: 1462; Hour: 10

Ginny hugs her, mumbling apologies for the way she acted before, but how she just didn't want to talk about It - her family. Harry smiles like a fool, and doesn't pull

away even after Lavender and Angelina crush her. Then he keeps holding on when he feels her shoulders shake, because he knows she needs him for comfort and to make sure no one can see her until her eyes stop being red.

She takes a shower at the safe house, scrubbing too hard, like the clothes might have left a taint on her since her last shower, even after they were washed as well. She leaves them in the bathroom, heading to Draco's room when Ginny raises an eyebrow and tells her that her trunk was moved there by the blond the morning after Hermione went to St. Mungo's. She doesn't answer the unspoken question, rushing to the bedroom on the pretense of standing like a fool in her towel.

"He's burning your clothes..." Harry trails off as she walks out of the room, his hand moving in a vague gesture toward the kitchen.

"What? My clothes are in my trunk."

"The other ones."

She walks to the kitchen, stopping in front of the open glass doors to watch Draco move around a pit of fire. There are three garbage bags burning, and on top of one she can see the clothes she left in the bathroom. His eyes meet hers, matching the twilight settling down on them. They are both silent, a passing of mutual understanding that they don't have to admit to.

"I'm surprised you aren't yelling about now." Harry sounds amused behind her.

"She wouldn't have been able to get the blood out." Draco answers for her, maybe knowing that she can't. She watches the clothes burn instead. There hadn't been any blood on them.

Twenty-Eight

Day: 1462; Hour: 17

"See, the first couple nights we went to places that were empty. Remember what they said? They were going to send us to places that they knew were abandoned the longest or new locations that had turned "old" and were going to be, or already were, abandoned soon. That's why we didn't get anything. Then...bam. But now they know we're on to them, so they're packing up and moving on."

"Thanks for that, Justin," Hermione mumbles, plugging her nose as she steps closer to the body on the ground. "I think she was a Muggle. Jeans, blouse..." She can't make herself look at the face, because that makes it real.

"Could have been an Innocent." Justin shrugs, waits a beat, and then rushes on. "I mean, from the wizarding world. I'm really happy we aren't on the run from the Ministry and Order anymore, as we can do...this."

He levitates the woman, wrapping her up, and placing the Portkey on her without raising anything besides his wand. Hermione ignores it because she doesn't want anything to remind her of the way those bodies felt against her rubber gloved hands. He follows behind her as she enters a side room, both of them tearing through drawers to find any papers.

"You really scared us, Hermione. I mean, Ginny was really worried, but we told her - she was coherent, she wasn't bleeding, she's getting help from the best Healers in the world. But then she started talking about how that didn't help her family any and...you know. It was a bad subject."

"I'm fine."

"Now, yeah. But all of us, except Fitz of course, went to Mungo's after. Draco showed up too. I thought Harry and Draco were going to kill the Healer when she said we couldn't go into your room, and she wouldn't give information. Not even to Harry! Then everything went crazy in your room, and it took seven guards to hold us back - they had to use spells, you know."

"I was dying." She doesn't know why she admits to this, and she hurries to open more drawers to hide her face.

"I know," Justin whispers. "We all knew. Ginny and Lav were crying, Harry punched a guard in the face... It was... I..."

"Let's not talk about it, Justin."

"Okay." But he doesn't sound like he agrees, so she isn't surprised when he follows her out of the room and starts talking again. "Lupin gave Mungo's a list of who was allowed in your room. You could only have three, and he put him, Harry and Malfoy on it. Why... People weren't very happy when they found out Malfoy was on it. I mean, Harry had Ginny sneak in one time, but, you know. Malfoy went back every night but one, always before or after Harry. I--"

"Justin," Hermione sounds exasperated because she is. "You never babble on. Never."

She looks up from the empty drawers in the second room. The entire place was empty, left behind, and everything important was taken with whoever left. They still checked anyway.

"Sorry."

"No. What's wrong? Seamus? Are you worried?"

"No, he's supposed to be back tomorrow."

"Then wh--"

"I think I may have... I think I might have gotten pregnant." Hermione stares at him long enough for him to change his sentence. "I mean, that is, I think I got a girl pregnant. A woman, actually, because...well, yeah. Yeah."

Hermione stares at him with wide eyes for a moment before dropping them to his shoes, scratching her shoulder as a way to distract his attention from her awkwardness. She didn't even know he was sleeping with anyone. "Who?"

"Margarete Ust." He looks sheepish and Hermione actually chokes a little.

"What?"

"She... I don't know! I checked on her at Mungo's the next day after everything, and she was being released and... You know! Drinks, conversation, she...she was wearing this really pretty dress, and...you know!"

Hermione laughs. Justin blushes deeply. She laughs too hard, and she can't remember the last time she did, but it's uncontrollable. Justin's innocent face and endearing stuttering is covered by his hands, until she gets a hold of herself.

"I'm sorry. That was..." She has to trail off to stop herself from laughing again. "That was inappropriate."

"What do I do, Hermione? Marry her?"

"That's something you have to discuss with her."

"I... I don't think I'll make a very good father." He looks ashamed as he admits this.

"I think you'll make a wonderful father, Justin. There's not a person in any world who can know your heart and not love it." She pulls him into a hug, and his nerves clutch her shirt in his fists.

"How am I supposed to raise a child in a world like this?" His question rushes sadness toward her.

"The war is almost over. At least this part of it. That's why we fought at all, Justin. To not be afraid of this."

"I'm scared anyway."

Hermione nods and pulls him tighter. "I think that's okay."

Day: 1462; Hour: 20

She remembers Justin talking about how they were all there at the hospital with her, right outside the door. How in that desperate moment of loneliness, of fearing the end, it was her that didn't notice them and not them who weren't there. She smiles at them, perhaps too happily because they all look distinctly nervous when she walks out of the room.

Day: 1462; Hour: 22

Hermione is aware of Harry's eyes on her back as she walks into Draco's room and shuts the door, blushing. The blond doesn't even look up from his notebook, and she almost expects Harry to start knocking. Instead, she hears the soft click of his own bedroom door shutting down the hall.

She sits on the bed and watches Draco as he tries to puzzle something out. She wonders how he felt when he found out Lupin suspected their friendship to go even beyond her and Ginny's - she wonders how *she* feels about it, even. There is a lot she should probably think about in the recent developments between them, especially in his actions. Like framing the photo, or showing up at St. Mungo's so many times, his jealousy, how Justin said he was angry when he couldn't get into the room the first night, or how he lets her sleep beside him for the purpose of just sleep. But she feels overwhelmed by the idea of picking these things apart, and she mostly just wants to take them and know they are there. That, maybe, Draco Malfoy cares about her, just a little.

Hermione isn't one who likes to jump to conclusions though. She likes hard, solid facts that don't have to be picked apart. Things that are picked apart only produce theories, and theories should never be taken as fact, especially when it came to the blond sitting across from her. Besides, being analytical about this felt too taxing when she has so many other things to hate, and fear, and worry about. It feels like she doesn't have enough time to think, only do.

All the same, Hermione did not enter the room tonight with just the intention to sleep. She found herself...but even the word makes her roll her eyes and blush a little. Not because she's that much of a prude, at least she doesn't think so, but because the word sounds so *immature*, even in her own head. She just found that she needed...a release, of sorts.

She is at a loss of how to show this. One of them usually just grabs the other, and then a kiss quickly turns into something much more. But she has kissed him first with that being the intention a handful of times. It is almost embarrassing how many times he took the initiative, because Hermione views herself as a fairly strong, take-charge woman. When she had taken charge with the intention of sex, he had been walking past her in an empty hall, coming in the door of an empty house, or coming out of sleep. She likes to think of them as surprise attacks.

Now he's just sitting there in his corner across the room, deeply involved with whatever he is doing, and not even looking at her. She wonders if the new habit of sleeping together to sleep has put some sort of dullness to their...need for a release, of sorts. Like a downfall to their hunger, and for being lovers and not even a couple let alone married, it is rather pathetic. She pauses in thought, realizing that if they were just lovers and now *not* having sex, that really meant they weren't lovers at all. She feels a bit panicked by the thought. Most of their interaction had to do with sex, it was the motivating force behind the progress they made to become friends. She--

"Granger, if your own thoughts cause you to make that face the past five minutes,

I really would hate to be inside your mind for even a moment."

She jumps, focusing back on his face and laughs nervously. He gives her a look like he's still questioning her mental health, and he probably is. His eyebrow does a slow climb before he turns his attention back to the notebook. It's a new one, she notices.

She scans her head for something to say to bring his attention back, or an excuse for something that she was thinking. But she doesn't really have the nerve to say she was thinking something dirty. She dismisses the thought of *asking* if he wanted to before it's even completely formed, because there was no passion in such a thing. Going over there and kissing him would be awkward with his intensity on the notebook.

Searching her mind for something useful, she almost laughs when she thinks What Would Lavender Do? The question is absurd, and she doubts she could ever forgive herself if she followed that thought process. But Hermione Granger refuses to turn around and go to sleep, because it is a puzzle in front of her, and she likes puzzles.

The thought of Lavender still forces a memory to emerge despite denying that line of thought. Hermione blushes and looks up at Draco as if he could read her mind, but he's still concentrating elsewhere. It's probably very corny, and it's probably been done a billion times, and he probably won't even notice - but, really, she hasn't got anything better to work with. She also has a feeling he is going to know exactly what she's up to if he does notice, no matter how hard she tries to play it off, but that couldn't be helped either.

She actually has to convince herself that he *likes* her body before she stands up. Hermione is confident in her mind, and her body - not in health, but in attractiveness to others - she had always told her herself was far less important. Except, of course, in moments like this where her mind failed her and her body was what was left. If she hadn't been involved with Draco for...*God*, it was *over a year* now since he first kissed her, she wouldn't have been so bold.

She takes her shirt off first, letting it drop to the ground, and not looking to see if he has noticed. If he hasn't, she'll probably retire to sleep and call it a good try. Unbuttoning her jeans, she pulls the zipper down quick, and it's loud enough that she doubts he hasn't at least looked up at the sound. She hums in her head to distract herself from his silence. Her curiosity still gets the better of her when she hooks her thumbs into the waist of her pants, and her gaze darts up toward him with absolutely no permission from most her mind.

He's not looking at her, but rather her chest, and she notices that she's giving him a rather liberal look, bent over as she is to pull her pants down. His notebook is open on his lap, his hand holding a few sheets of parchment frozen over a stack of them at his side. She blushes despite herself, looking down at the uneven wood of the floor as she pulls her pants down to her ankles. She makes sure not to do it with any finesse, because Hermione doesn't think she's a real Hum Porn Music While Dancing and Stripping sort of girl.

She looks up from peeling her sock off at the sound of a small thud, and doesn't really know how nervous she was that he would ignore her until he doesn't. The parchment is now out of his hand and she is guessing the thud was from his notebook hitting the stack of papers at his side. His legs are stretched out in front of him now, his back and head leaning against the wall, and he looks completely relaxed as he watches her. It makes her more nervous. Shouldn't this be where he makes his way over?

She almost chickens out when she stands upright but his eyes connect with hers and she doesn't. She knows that look, dreams about it even, and so she reaches behind her for the clasp on her bra. She stops instead, contemplating, and acts on impulse as she begins walking over toward him. She straddles his lap and watches his gaze drift down her body as she sits.

He still doesn't move, his hands against the floor at his sides, but there's a hardness under her that convinces her to keep going even with his unwillingness to join in. She hopes she's not making a fool of herself, more so now that her flimsy excuse of getting ready for bed is gone. But he would have stopped watching if he hadn't been interested, and this was just another situation that Hermione can't see through his steel skull - or where she's still learning the way he likes to play.

She reaches behind her for the clasp again, undoing it this time. She's slow to pull it off, and when she drops it down on top of his notebook she can see his fingers clench against the floor. She hadn't thought the knickers situation out before she sat however, and she stays still in a moment of awkwardness. She probably looks stupid as she reaches forward, grasping his shoulder and pushing herself back up to her feet.

She's a bit *in his face*, but she reminds herself of his apparent fondness for such a thing, and colors a deeper red as she begins pulling her underwear off. She keeps herself steady with his shoulder, and it tenses under her palm as she pulls her knickers off one leg and then the other. She swears she hears him groan when she stands up again, dropping the blue-striped cloth to the opposite side as her bra.

He still doesn't move when she sits down again, though he is harder and he's breathing quicker. She cocks her head at him, his eyes intense and dark on hers, and she wonders if Draco is the sort of man who likes to be tied up. That is really what he's doing, but without the binding, like he is testing his own restraint. The game, in that case, was to get him to break.

Hermione bites her lip and reaches down to the hem of his shirt, pulling it up. His arms move up in response, but he's no help in removing it. The second it clears his arms, his hands are back on the floor again. Hermione hums, and glares at him when he smirks - it cements her determination.

She runs her hands across his shoulders and scratches down his chest, pressing kisses to his neck. Her mouth finds the spot beneath his jaw that never fails to cause a reaction, and she sucks, biting down as she rocks herself forward against his erection. He moans and bucks up, his body tightening under her hands. The fabric of his jeans feels odd, but not entirely unpleasant, and so she does it again. When he tries to rock up in return she raises herself to her knees, denying him.

There's a powerful feeling blossoming inside her, and she thinks she likes this game after all. Her self-consciousness always stole her motivation to stay in a position of power too long, and though she is still unsure of what she should do next, she likes the challenge. She likes being the one to lead where this is going and be the one in control.

She pulls her mouth away from him and leans back, looking at him as she scrapes her nails through the trail of hair leading to his waistband. His cheeks are just beginning to flush, but she wants him red in the face and his eyes glazed. Unbuttoning his pants and unzipping him, he lifts his bum off the floor as she tugs his pants down. She sits just below his knees and runs her hands up his thighs, edging her fingers between his thighs and his boxers. Sometimes he wears these, or boxer-briefs, sometimes nothing - she's never told him she likes him in all three.

Leaning forward, she kisses his chest, running her tongue in circles around his nipples as her hands slide further up. She reaches until she is *almost* there, and then pulls her hands out, reaching for the waistband instead. Draco grunts and she smiles, releasing his nipple from her mouth as she pulls back. He's glaring at her this time as he lifts his hips and she's careful in dragging his underwear off. She leaves it down around his calves, knowing he'll kick it off later himself, and takes her seat beneath his knees again.

She puts a hand right above his knee, sliding it up his thigh as she leans forward, struck by inspiration because she knows he likes watching her do this. She's still

blushing about it, but she pretends he knows it's just her arousal. Tracing her index finger around the line of his lips, she rests it on his bottom lip and waits. He reacts quickly, moving his head to take her finger in his mouth. He sucks on it hard, and then circles his tongue around it, powerful strokes up the length of it. The eagerness with which he does it, the almost angry swirls of his tongue, and the raw way in which he looks at her sends her stomach clenching. She grips his thigh hard on reaction and breathes in deep as she becomes even more turned on. His tongue is proving what he's not letting his hands, his eyes tearing holes in her.

She pulls her finger back, a little short of breath, and he watches its journey to her nipple. She circles, pinches, pulls, and then cups her breast with a moan. She lets go of his thigh, purposely brushing against his erection and it jerks against the side of her hand. She lifts her other finger to his mouth, and his eyes are back on hers as he laves it. He nips the tip of her finger as she pulls it out, and watches as she brings it down to her breast.

"Do you have any idea how ready I am right now?" It took her three minutes to actually convince herself to say this. Draco groans, his eyes tracking downward.

She licks her palm and reaches for him, silk over steel, and touches him in all the ways she knows he likes. He groans again, deeper, and his eyes fall shut as his head thuds back against the wall. It looks like an effort for him to lift his head and look at her again, his hips moving in time to her hand. She stops when his lips part and his breathing is shallow pants. His face is red, his eyes are glazed.

She moves up his lap, bending to kiss his neck again, swirling her tongue in circles to the spot beneath his ear. She sucks and laves, reaching down between his thighs, and she can see his hand lift, drop, lift, and drop again to the floor. She smiles to herself, her heart beating wildly as she pulls back and puts two fingers against his bottom lip. His expression screams need, but he glares at her and doesn't take her fingers in his mouth because he's a smart man, and he knows what her next move is.

She removes her hands from him, one cupping her breast and the other to her mouth as she sucks on the fingers herself. She sucks hard, her cheek hollowing in imitation. She had contemplated it, but she would prefer him to break inside of her rather than in her mouth. She releases her fingers with a pop as she studies the color of his eyes. Dark grey, his pupils dilated, and a look that makes her feel like she's burning up inside in the best way. She drops her hand and pushes one finger inside herself, then the second after a stroke. She moans, rising up higher on her knees, and moans again when Draco's mouth attacks her nipple. She breathes out harshly, raising her free hand to clutch the back of his head.

"Oh, Draco."

He's breathing out hard from his nostrils, the coolness of his breath sending goosebumps across her heated skin. She opens her eyes to the top of his head in time to see his arm raised, hesitant in the air. She moves quickly, reaching down to grasp him again with his hips jerking up and a deep, guttural sound echoing across her skin. She moves her fingers up to the nub that sends her falling forward into him, choking on his name. She lowers herself down until just the tip of him is inside of her, and then pulls up, both of them groaning. Her body is shaking with the determination to not give in to her more basic urges and she can feel him trembling against her as well. She repeats the action a second time, but when she goes to pull up she is slammed all the way down, and she cries out over his own reaction, knowing he has finally caved.

"*Jesus Christ*, Hermione." His fingers squeeze into her hips as he brings her back down again, thrusting up at the same time and making her cry out too loudly. His voice is deep, rasping; a favorite sound.

"About time, Draco. I was about to... Oh, my God. I was about to...ugh. Jesus, yes." She's glad he keeps hitting that spot within her for several reasons, but trying to speak at the same time isn't a good idea.

"I couldn't...*fuck*." Not for him, either.

He grabs her hand off his shoulder, still wet from being inside of her, and sucks the digits into his mouth this time. Hermione can't keep herself from making those little *ngh, nuh, nugh* sounds she does whenever she is in pain or *this*, the exact opposite of such a vulgarity. His moans vibrate against her fingers and he anchors an arm around her waist, moving in a way that suggests he's finally kicking his boxers off.

She pulls her fingers out of his mouth and kisses him, his tongue hot and demanding as he moves her onto her back. His hands slide up the back of her thighs and under her kneecaps, preventing her from wrapping them around him. He pushes them forward, driving deeper, and she cries out so loudly she slaps her arm over her mouth. He bites the other side and she moves it, thrusting her tongue into his mouth when his lips meet hers.

She comes with a scream into his mouth, her nails digging into his shoulders. For a moment she thinks she might black out, as her head explodes off into some world that only he can bring her to. She comes back to reality when his cheek slides against hers, his face dropping to her shoulder. His weight is pressed into her, his

body trembling, and she's distantly upset that she missed him getting off. It is one of her favorite things to do.

"I might have liked that game," she admits through her panting, and he laughs through his own.

Day: 1463; Hour: 5

Draco is still asleep when she wakes, his face turned away from her and buried in the pillow, static locks of white hair sticking up in every direction. There's a faint glow to light the room but no real color, and she knows dawn is just arriving outside the windows. She's only just awake, barely able to form coherent thoughts, and already her heart was thumping nervously.

She had been thinking about doing this for a while now. She had visualized it in great detail - mostly aided by a very interesting magazine collection she had found in Ron's room a couple years ago - and had accepted that she probably wouldn't like it. She had done very embarrassing things involving her mouth and some choice vegetables that she would never, ever, ever tell anyone about. Ever. The only thing truly holding her back was the idea that she probably wouldn't be very good at it, and that was a hard thing to accept for Hermione Granger.

Practice did make perfect. It certainly wasn't the first time she found herself in a new situation with Draco, and it wasn't likely to be the last. Unfortunately, with this, she didn't have his amazing ability to make her forget to think anything, let alone what she was doing. She had debated doing it for some time now, and though it wasn't something he ever asked of her, it's something she wants to do. As long as she abides by one basic rule, she figures the most harm done could be her embarrassment if he pulls her away. She has learned that he won't make fun of her for anything she doesn't know, or does incorrectly, in this part of her life.

She is surprised he doesn't wake up when she shifts her leg from between his to the other side, pulling the sheets over her head and sliding down the bed. He sleeps too lightly most days, and while she would like him to wake up *some time* in the process, in the beginning wasn't part of the plan. She's a little scared, which is okay because she's still going to do it, but she doesn't know if she could manage if he was aware the entire time.

She pushes herself down until she's lying between his sprawled legs, one hand holding herself above him and the other pushing her hair from her face. He's still breathing deep and evenly, asleep, but she's far more concerned with the penis in front of her face. The head, the veins, the testicles, the pubic hair. A typical penis,

really. No crookedness, odd birthmarks, scars. Just any sort of penis she might see had she gone to Muggle school, enduring sexual education classes. Inside was the same basic makeup she had seen on posters at the doctor's office.

She was looking at this too literally, and she doesn't know if that's the sort of mood she should be setting in her mind. Sure, it was a bit different. If only because this was *the* penis, to her. The one she had felt against her back, her stomach, thrusting into her hip. The one she had touched, had needed, had even *begged* for. This is the one she has felt inside of her, the part of Draco that at times becomes part of her, and does things that completely make her lose control. That makes her feel so good she thinks she's going to have a heart attack, that her mind will explode, that she'll set on fire and not even notice or *care*.

Her breath comes a little quicker and she has to push herself up so she's not so close to his skin. That was better, yes. It would be good to try and enjoy this rather than feel like she was trying to swallow a science project. She just had to go for it really.

It's soft in her hand, sticky from a few hours ago, though it isn't that big of a deal because she had tasted herself before. On her fingers, on his, in his mouth - she had gotten rather used to it, in fact. She lowers herself down to her forearm, only distantly aware that she's arching an eyebrow at it, before sticking out her tongue to lick the tip. It's pretty smooth and interesting, the feel of it, and she's immediately curious about the rest.

She grips the base more firmly, wrapping her fingers around it again, and licks her lips, remembering the way she kept her lips on her *practice items* to prevent any teeth grazing. She lowers her head, putting the tip into her mouth, and stares at his bellybutton as she swirls her tongue around it. It isn't until after she does it a second time that she sees his stomach collapse on a breath, and realizes that he hadn't been breathing before.

He's already awake then, of course. This is a man that reaches for his wand when the floor squeaks right outside of the door in the middle of the night. She doesn't even know how he sleeps through the supposed noises she makes when she's asleep. Maybe he only wakes up when things are unfamiliar. This would be one of those, and he's up sooner than she hoped, but later than she expected.

She swirls her tongue around him again, again, and then sucks. If he makes a sound she can't hear it over the loud fan in the corner, but she can see the sheet curl up by his hip, the outline of his fingers in a fist. She's feeling very *shy* now, which is quite ridiculous, as she takes the soft length of him into her mouth. She's

pretty sure she's blushing, and she has to close her eyes to distract herself from wondering if it was going badly. She concentrates on the feel of it inside her mouth, hardening under the strokes of her tongue, the head knocking against her throat. She tightens her lips around him, sucking hard as she raises her head.

Hermione isn't sure if he lets out a hard breath or says the beginning of her name, but it makes her open her eyes as his hips shift. She pulls him out of her mouth with a pop, watching his stomach cave in and then rise, his fingers twitching on his chest. She eyes the vein that runs under and cocks her head, licking up from her thumb at his base to the very tip. He grunts when she reaches the skin between the head and the shaft, so she licks it again. On the third one he groans, and his fingers uncurl from his chest, reaching out toward her before pressing hard into his skin. It reminds her of a cat, stretching out its claws.

Taking a breath, she pumps him with her hand and licks her lip. He tastes of sweat, and her, and him, and it's really not as bad as she thought it might be. She looks down and eyes his testicles critically, trying to remember what the girl in the magazine had done. She reaches forward with her free hand, cradling them in her palm, the skin tighter now than it had looked earlier. She pulls them down gently, but stops when he grunts, not knowing if it's from pleasure or discomfort. He flexes his hips and so she tugs again, and his hand repeats the claw movement. She takes this for a good sign, and she angles her head to tug and lick, his thighs tensing at her shoulders.

She pulls back to look up at him, far harder in her hand that he had been, longer and the head bigger. She leans over to the inside of his thigh and kisses his skin, nipping it like he has done so many times to her, before returning her mouth to his penis. She thinks penis may be too clinical, but dick sounds silly in her head. Perhaps she'll say cock, and she wonders if he would be amused or something else if she did. Broomstick, weener, manhood, long johnson, hotdog, wand, quivering loins.

She laughs at the last one, his head in her mouth, and he moans loudly before she can stop herself. She looks up in the surprise and he mutters something above her, just a gurgle of whispers under the fan and sheet. Hermione takes pride in being a bit of a quick learner, so she lowers her head, taking in more of him, and pressing her tongue up against him.

"Hmm?" She draws this out and he groans.

"Fuck," he says darkly, his voice rough and the way she likes it, followed by a string of other words she can't hear.

Then his hand lifts from his chest, the bed wobbles under his movement, and then the sheet is gone. Hermione looks up in a mix of surprise and feeling like she just got busted for something he already knew she had been doing. His eyes meet hers and he groans without her even moving, his gaze dropping and more intent on looking where her mouth is than anything else. She flushes, just lying there with him in her mouth for several seconds. She had been hoping he would leave the sheet down, instead of staring at her.

She is very conscious of his gaze as she drops hers back to his stomach, resuming her task of sliding her mouth up and down as much of his length as she can handle. She really can't imagine that it's anything pleasant to watch, but then she remembers the way *she* watches sometimes. The way he'll catch her looking and will raise up on his arms so she can see where the two of them are joined, and how he watches too. Maybe it's something like that.

He lifts her hair, gathering it with both of his hands and piling it on top of her head until he can manage to hold it with only one. The other slides down the sides of her face, over her indented cheek, and she pauses until his knuckles brush along her jaw and to the nape of her neck. For a second she thinks he might try to push her down more, to put more of himself inside her mouth, and she knows she'll gag if he does. She squeezes her hand on him in response, and when he makes a little sound above her, she does it again. His hand keeps going, down between her shoulder blades, pressing into her, fingers outstretched to touch as much of her as he can.

She still feels awkward with him watching her, hoping that she was doing this right and in a way that looked remotely attractive. She tugs with one hand, pumping with the other, and bobs her head, exploring the texture and ridges with her tongue. He moans and flexes his hips, causing her to gag a little, and she sucks harder, moving faster.

"He...'ione," he pants and grunts her name, bringing her eyes back to his.

She blinks at him, startled by the intimacy of the act that just now hits her. His neck is flushed; lips parted and wet, his eyes bright and trained on her. His fingers are ghosting back up her cheeks, gentle in contrast to how hard she is stroking her tongue. She almost grins at knowing that she has done this to him, and that it's not from the mutual give and take of sex, but something she has done just for him. She's starting to understand why he likes giving her oral sex so much, and if her mouth wasn't so occupied, she might be flashing that smirk of satisfaction that he gives her.

"Solve...arith...prob..." He moans when she hums a laugh at his half-formed words.

"Like a...fucking...ingredients...secret potion."

She raises an eyebrow at him saying something about *potion ingredients* at this very moment, and he growls in response. She has no idea what he's on about, but she never could have imagined how very *turned on* she would be doing this. Paying homage to one of her favorite parts of his anatomy was one thing, but his reactions from the noises he makes to the way he looks at her is enough to make her feel dizzy. She also likes the feeling of power and satisfaction that comes over her, knowing that she can make him lose control of himself. She can watch him openly now, unhindered by her own physical pleasure, and she somehow feels closer to him than before they had fallen asleep that night.

She's so busy burning everything to her memory that she forgets to feel uncomfortable. *He* certainly wasn't, even with himself so on display. When they first started this relationship he preferred to hide his face from her. Now he can't stop staring at her, and she can't stop taking it all in. She never thought giving someone oral sex would be anything more than an unpleasant obstacle to deal with, if she couldn't avoid it all together. She can't always be right about everything, she concedes, despite the ache creeping up in her jaw.

His control deteriorates the longer she goes, though she's too focused on him to know how long it has been. She pays attention to the noises he makes to know how he likes it and what he likes, and if it weren't for how tired her mouth was getting, she would draw this out for hours, maybe.

His hand is fisted in her hair, pulling it tight against the scalp, the other one clenched onto her arm. She had reached up across the expanse of his stomach and chest to rub and pinch his nipples when she saw him start to do it himself. She rather liked the idea that every bit of his pleasure was coming from just her. She loves the approving noises he makes deep in his throat and the whole array of aroused sounds he can't help.

His hips are moving in shallow thrusts, his breath coming fast, and he's practically *writhing* on the bed. Besides a few backward jerks of his head his eyes haven't left the vicinity of her face. They remind her of the river behind her parents' house, the stones under clear, sparkling, rushing water. She would collect them in her hands, these dirty pretty things, in the summers when all she needed was wet feet and the sun. When everything was beautiful, and new, and there were no limits to the happiness she could own.

"Hermione." She loves the way he says her name when he's like this.

"Mmhm," and she gags when he thrusts deep, moaning and pulling her hair.

That seems to be the end of it for several rapid breaths, but then he tugs on her arm twice, making her stop all movement. "I'm going to come."

His voice is husky and rough, and she wants to say something just to keep him talking. She pulls her head up, moving her jaw from side to side once he's out of her mouth. "I believe that's the point, Draco."

She can't help the bossy tone or the roughness to her own voice. He stares back at her for several seconds as if she said nothing at all. It's as if her words had to be filtered through the haze and into coherency in his mind before he could understand them. Oh, she likes this *a lot*.

"Shit, Granger," and for a second she thinks he's angry. "Please tell me you still have your Hogwarts uniform."

"What?" She has no idea why he would want to bring that up now. "It's in my bedroom at Grim--"

"Thank you, Merlin."

She blinks at him until he shifts beneath her, and she figures it's more important to take care of the throbbing erection in front of her face than ask him what the hell he was on about. Oral sex caused Draco Malfoy to lose his mind, apparently. She might have been worried if she weren't so pleased.

He groans when she lowers her mouth on him again, the elbow he had raised himself up on wobbling before he fell back onto the bed with a jerk. She sucks hard, stroking fiercely with her tongue, and matches the jerking of her hand to the speed of her bobbing. She ignores her tired jaw and starts humming when he begins thrusting again, feeling him pulse against her tongue, his fingers clenching hard into her arm and hair.

"Fuck...shit..."

She's prepared herself for any reaction, so she expects it when he rams himself off the back of her throat, his body arching off the bed with a loud moan crammed into his mouth from biting his lips together. She continues to suck until his hips collapse back onto the bed, taking in every detail she can, his come salty and strange on her taste buds. She starts to pull her mouth away when his hand relaxes the death grip on her hair, his air leaving him in a huff. She inhales quickly through her nose when

he raises his head, having always found him beautiful post-orgasm.

She releases him from her mouth, using the hand that he wasn't holding to him and raising it to her lips, trying to prevent anything from falling out. She catches some against her lips, swallowing the rest. It isn't as unpleasant as she had thought, and he gives her a look that he sometimes gives her when her back hits a wall or she breaks apart around him - she still doesn't know what it means.

She licks her lips, and when he gives her a rogue grin, his eyes still shining like the stones, she can't help but laugh and grin back. She feels elated - though she doesn't really know why - and turned on. She's also a bit proud of herself.

He laughs too, perhaps because her grin is a bit wolfish, and gives a tug to her hair to motivate her climb up his body. He lets go of her arm to wrap his own around her waist when her face is in front of his, pulling her against him and off of her raised hand. He kisses her then, his tongue owning her mouth and obviously not caring about the taste. She wonders if he gave up too much control to not take some back now, but this is perfectly okay with her.

He pulls back with a nip to her bottom lip, but she speaks before he can. "Happy Birthday, Draco."

He looks startled for a moment, which is somehow adorable and attractive at the same time. "It's not my birthday."

"Yes, it is."

"No...but feel free to do that again when it is." He leans in to bite her neck, grinning against her skin when she moans.

"No, really... I--" She cuts off on a whimper when he slides his hand down her backside to feel around her entrance.

He growls under the noise she makes, and she can feel it rumble in his chest beneath her. "You got so wet from sucking my cock, didn't you?"

"Jesus," she groans against his shoulder, part embarrassment and the rest at how good it felt.

"You have no idea--"

"Wait, Draco," she breathes, lifting her head and trying to remember something

important.

He raises his eyebrows at her, sliding his hand back up to squeeze her bum, and then rolls them over. Her obvious arousal at getting him off seemed to turn him on enough to warrant silence, and he looks as if he's planning a mission. He palms her breast, and she nearly forgets again.

"I saw it, on the calendar, at..." She breathes in sharply, because his fingers are just as magical as the rest of him. "Today is your birthday. Promise."

His half-hooded eyes widen slightly, and he looks perplexed for a moment before dropping his head to her neck again. He sucks a spot beneath her achy jaw, then trails hot kisses down her skin. He pauses, his mouth hovering just far enough over her skin for his breath to tickle her. He had discovered this particular weakness months ago - at times he did it on accident, but the few times it happened were usually on purpose. She can't stop herself from giggling, and when she raises her shoulder to block him out, he nudges it out of the way with his chin. She finds it annoying, which he likes, but it's one of the only playful things he does, so sometimes she secretly likes it.

"You're positive?" She can hear the smirk.

"Yes," she laughs, and grabs both sides of his face, pulling him away from her neck.

He kisses her shortly, tugging on her lip before pulling back to look at her. "Well, shit," he pushes his tongue into his cheek, shrugs a shoulder, and then it's his turn to grin wolfishly at her. "Whatever shall I do to celebrate?"

Twenty-Nine

Day: 1463; Hour: 16

Hermione finally *sleeps* -- it feels like one of those long nights of hard sleep where you dream nothing and wake up feeling *awake* rather than like you might pass back out if you stand. She couldn't have slept more than two hours after they had collapsed from the enthusiastic *celebrations*, but she still feels rested. Draco had taken his time claiming every bit of her body, and every sound she made, as part of his birthday present. If that's what she got on his birthday, she is honestly looking forward to her own for the first time in years.

She would have slept even longer had it not been for the knock at the door. There is a rustling of papers, taps against the floor, and then his hand brushes across her chest as he pulls the blanket up. Goosebumps are left in his wake before he walks away, and then the door creaks open, followed by whispers.

She opens her eyes, surprised to find twilight outside the window. She reaches up to rub the sleep from her eyes and looks toward the door when the whispering stops. Draco is looking back at her and she gives him a lazy smile. She feels content, sated, and just *nice*. Besides, it's his birthday and that calls for a little more than her typical morning moodiness.

His lips twitch and he looks distinctly like a satisfied male before turning back to the crack in the door. She can't deny him his role in her current mood, so she doesn't roll her eyes like she feels the need to do. He must have been up for awhile, already showered and dressed as he is. His-- The door opens wider and her mood and current line of thought quickly vanish as Harry is revealed on the other side. Draco abandons her as he slides past Harry, and then it's just the two of them as he steps in and shuts the door. She can't say she's looking forward to anything that's about to happen.

He stands there for a moment, unsure. "I would sit on the bed but... ew."

Her face flames and she rolls her head to look up at the ceiling. "Harry---"

"I can't say I ever wanted to hear you shagging someone, let alone... But thankfully, Ginny was there to distract me." She knew she had been too loud, she just had not cared at the time.

"T-M-I, Harry."

"Imagine how I felt!" He laughs, and it actually sounds genuine. Then, after a short wait, "You and Malfoy, huh?"

"You should know that with me... Well, it says a lot about who he has become."

"I... You know, I've grown up, Hermione. I worked with Malfoy a couple times before this, and I heard a lot of things, some... some rumors about this, and I knew he had grown up too. It took a lot for me to accept the change in him, to maybe... to maybe forgive him. But after I killed Voldemort, I just... I wanted, I *needed* to be done. With the past, and that hate I felt inside. Malfoy has proved himself... especially to you. And you, I trust, even if I *really* don't get it..." He trails off at her watery smile, but his eyes take on a hard look. "If he fucks that up at all, I'll--"

"I know."

"Good. Back to the trust thing... I have something I have to do tonight, so I was wondering if you would lead Ginny and the new Phoenix on the team. It's just for tonight."

Hermione blinks up at him. Did he know that they gave her the 'easy' missions for years, that Harry himself didn't get her for the 'final battle', that she had led a team perhaps five times, and it hadn't always gone right? Usually - because usually they didn't have three leaders in charge, only one - they were split into groups on a mission, but no one actually led that group. Now here he was, trusting her with Ginny's life.

"You're sure about this?"

He shrugs and sits down next to her on the bed despite his previous "ew". She holds the blanket tighter to herself to prevent it from slipping down until he gets settled. "I heard stories, you know. I mean, no details of the missions, of course. But I heard stories about you from people who came through the Recovery Team."

"Well, I'm glad I was popular during story time." She's sarcastic, and perhaps a little bitter.

"They just knew you as my friend, so... But I was really worried, for a long time. We all have a coin to let us know if we're called for backup, or to meet at a preassigned spot at the location if something goes wrong, you know? Well, I had another one that I carried with me, always. I even wore my pants to sleep all the

time so I could feel it if it got hot. I set it up with Moody… He was to activate it if anything went really wrong with you. Ron has one too."

Hermione could feel something come to life inside of her. The little girl from Hogwarts, perhaps, who had felt so isolated and deserted by her best friends. She had felt so disconnected from them the entire war, and there they had been, connected to her. "I didn't know."

"It's not something you tell someone, I don't think. But… I was really surprised. I had thought you would be like… a beast," he laughs, "in fighting. You're smart, you know about a billion spells, and you always figure things out so quickly. But you also didn't have much practice in actually dueling outside of seeing it or reading about it. I know you must have been really scared and… and we weren't there, were we?"

"We all played our part."

"You keep saying that. I just did what I thought was best… maybe what other people thought was best too, and I'm sorry for that. Anyway, before I ramble on more because I have to go, I just wanted to say that… I almost don't believe the stories. You're a strong fighter, and I have a lot of faith in you leading tonight, that's why I asked. So?"

She smiles, and though a part of her is happy, there is a place where she doesn't think it's good enough. Maybe it never would be. Maybe she is selfish. "Of course."

Day: 1463; Hour: 20

Hermione grabs his chin, tilting his head back to look into eyes that do not see her. She can feel his pulse, weak in his neck, under the pressure of her fingertips. She speaks in low, soothing tones, though she doesn't know what she says and doesn't think he can hear her.

I saw him in the Graveyard, Dean, the new Phoenix on the team, had said when they broke through the door. Graveyard was what they had named the battle where Harry defeated Voldemort. Hermione had asked if it took place at a graveyard, and Dean had told her no and refused to say anything else. His eyes had looked too deep, his cheeks too shallow for her to push for details. She already knew.

I saw him in the Graveyard, again through her mind, because the man must have been captured there. Nearly dead, no sign of life behind his glazed eyes. She looks at him and all she can see is Ron.

Day: 1466; Hour: 4

Harry does not come back for three nights.

She doesn't think she's been asleep for more than five minutes when she is forced back to awareness, Draco's hand clenching so hard into her hip that later she will find it bruised. She doesn't even have time to open her eyes before she is jerked off of him and onto her side, so little of her body on the edge of the bed that if he were to unwrap his arm from around her she would crash to the floor. Her look is accusing, but his head is turned away, and she follows the line of his outstretched arm, his wand out and unwavering.

"Potter."

Her eyes snap up to Harry in the doorway, and she raises the hand not currently squeezing Draco's arm like a vice, and hugs the sheet to her chest to make sure she is covered. Draco's hand eases its death grip on her hip but his arm is still tensed and steady under her - more from her weight than the expectation of an attack now, she is guessing.

Harry looks wild, his hair messier than usual, clothes wrinkled, and his eyes wide and focused on her. "Hermione, come to my room when... you're ready."

He steps out of the doorway and closes the door, and she and Draco both stare at it for three startled seconds. He yanks her back and onto his chest, his arm pulling away from her as she pushes herself to her knees. "I thought you were going to drop me," because she doesn't know what to say about Harry.

"Not unless I had to." She can hear the rasp in his voice that tells her he had been sleeping as well.

She wonders if she should say thank you for protecting her like that, but it feels like it would be out of place. She still feels an odd sort of happiness that he bothered to, so she bends to kiss him briefly. He is still under her, from the fading panic of someone barging into the room or the oddness of it, she doesn't know.

She doesn't meet his eyes as she rolls and stumbles out of the bed, grabbing her pants and pulling them on. She finds his shirt next, and she's too worried about Harry to not put it on instead of looking for hers. Draco had a bad habit of throwing her clothes all over the bedroom. She thinks he secretly likes to watch her walk around trying to find them all in the morning.

"I'll be right back."

He doesn't say anything but she doesn't expect him to, closing the door softly behind her. She finds Harry's door ajar down the hall, and opens it to find a meeting that reminds her of when they went against the Order to find Ron the first time. Harry, Ginny, Justin, Lavender, Angelina, Seamus, and Dean stare up at her in their silence, and she closes the door behind her because she knows Draco, Rogers, and the new Auror weren't invited.

She has a very bad feeling about this that just grows bigger when Seamus brushes past her and out the door, his stance when he closes it proving that he left to stand watch. Hermione stays where she is until Harry beckons her over with an impatient wave to his hand. Ginny smiles at her, and she sees hope.

"They caught one of the Death Eaters in the leader circle about an hour ago. I got into the observation room when Lupin was interrogating him. We know where Ron is - it's a big place in Italy, one of the main places they're working from. They have some prisoners there, new Death Eaters they're training, and probably a lot of well trained ones too. I left the room when McGonagall came in to finish up the interrogation and get the layout of the place, so I only know it's big. Sounds like a mansion or something."

Hermione's heart had started a strange beat and adrenaline had swept through her the moment she heard Ron's name. "Is Lupin putting a team together?"

"I talked to Lupin after, pretended I only knew he caught one of the new leaders. He said they have some information, but it's going to take them until at least tomorrow night to get a team together, get details, and come up with the most efficient plan. We don't have that, Hermione. It won't be long until they know he was captured by us, if they don't know already. As soon as they do they will be packing up. We have to move tonight."

"I'm telling you, this isn't going to work." Angelina's tone suggests she's been trying to tell him this for at least five hours straight. "It's going to be light out in two hours, max. We have no idea what the layout is , so we can't even come up with a *plan*. We're going to go in far too short on people, with no darkness to help cloak us, with no idea what the place looks like, and with *no plan*. It's a suicide mission!"

"It's not a suicide mission," Ginny snaps.

"There are going to be dozens of them, to our what? Ten? Eight! Eight people with no idea what's going on! We don't know the layout - exits, where they will be

sleeping, where the prisoners are, the rooms they will most likely be in---" Angelina starts.

"So we go in as one unit. We circle the grounds if there are any, make sure they are clear, and then---" Justin cuts her off only to be cut off himself.

"What? Burst through the front door, yell surprise, and fire off the Killing Curse as they come?" Lavender is sarcastic.

"Basically." Harry is completely serious.

"Look, you know I want to find Ron, you know I want to finish this war. But I know what it feels like to almost die, and... And maybe we should wait until tomorrow night. Lupin will put on---" Lavender starts.

"No."

"--many people as possible, we'll know what the place looks--"

"No."

"--and we will have a plan that--"

"I said *no*, Lavender." Harry's expression is so vicious that even Hermione leans away from him. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to. I am. Ginny is. Whoever doesn't want to can leave the room now. If we wait until tomorrow, Ron will be hidden in another list of locations that mostly turn up abandoned. The longer we wait the closer to death *he* comes. He's been waiting long enough. I'm saving my best friend, and I'm doing it *tonight*. There is no time left."

"Harry," Angelina whispers quietly, *desperately*. "You're asking us to die."

The red of anger in his face goes pale. Hermione is suddenly reminded of the Muggle world, of Terminator --- *I would die for John Connor*. They would die for Harry Potter. So many already had. That's why Harry's face is pale. Because Harry no longer carries the weight of his destiny, but the weight of his past. People had died to win the war, but people had also died for Harry Potter to live. From his parents through to Fred, who stood in front of Harry and took the Killing Curse so Harry could deliver his own.

"I'm not asking anything of you," his voice comes out broken, but she doesn't think he knows this. "I'm just asking you if you want to go. I will not hate you if you walk

out the door, and if I die tonight, I won't blame you. I'm asking if you want to save Ron, to save the others, and bring down Death Eaters. I'm asking you if you're willing to die for *that*. I'm asking if you feel the *need* to do this.

"I know this is going to be hard. I know the chance of us making it out is smaller than it might have ever been. But my best friend would die for me, and I'm going to make sure he doesn't. If you don't want any part of this, I understand. But I'm leaving tonight."

The room is silent, Hermione feels sick and excited and scared. When they leave a minute later, all eight of them agree to meet on the front porch in an hour. Hermione doesn't feel like she has a choice. Maybe none of them did.

She would not let Harry go alone, even if Ron was not there. But now it is both of her best friends' lives. Would she die for that? Yes, and that is where she lacks the choice. Hermione could never turn her back to this. Hermione had never fought in this war just to get rid of the Death Eaters. She had almost died so many times for the lives of her and her friends. That didn't change no matter how dangerous the situation or how scared she was.

It had been that way ever since they were young, and it remains that way no matter how much of time and war rages between them now. The odds were against them, and Hermione, in that dark part of herself that she tries to ignore, knows it isn't likely they will all make it out alive. But there was still a chance they would, still a chance she could save Ron, and so she would go.

The doorknob rattles under her hand, and she notices that she is shaking. She pushes open the door and clenches her fists. She would not be afraid. Even if she were to die tonight, she would do as much as she could before it. To die for her friends was far better than dying of old age in her sleep. This is what she tries to tell herself.

Draco is awake, standing in the middle of the room. His hair looks like he might have been yanking on it, and his eyes are wide and alert on hers. It reminds her of Harry just minutes ago, when he had been standing in the doorway that she is in now - except Harry hadn't been naked. She hadn't bothered to ask Harry if she should tell Draco about the mission. He would have invited the blond himself. Hermione knows, even looking at him now, that she will not tell him anyway. Not because she doesn't think he should know, or that she doesn't trust him to not tell, or that she doesn't think they can use him. It's because he has no obligation to go, but she thinks he might anyway because of his boulder, because of his need to right his wrongs. Hermione thinks he has redeemed himself enough, and she cannot ask

him to go because he doesn't think so himself. If he died tonight it would not be for the future, but for the past. She cannot allow that.

She is thinking of an excuse when he speaks. "Leave the shirt, take off the rest."

Normally she would huff, or glare, or not do it for the sake of letting him know she doesn't follow his orders. But tonight she feels like maybe she owes it to him, because she suddenly feels *guilty*. Like he deserves to know she might not ever come back, but she's not telling him anyway. Like he deserves the chance to make the choice for himself, but she's making it anyway. She feels selfish, so she reminds herself that it's for him.

She might need this too, she thinks, and unbuttons her pants. In fact, she knows she needs this. When Harry had told her they were leaving in an hour, this is what she thought of doing. This is why she had been hoping he was still awake. She needed for him to be awake. She needed to be with him just in case - for him to make life pound through her veins, to make her forget, to make her not think about anything but him, and feeling, and what it is to be alive. She doesn't want to think about what that might mean.

She's looking at him rather shyly, standing there in nothing but his T-shirt, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. "I just wanted to see what that might look like."

It feels odd that he confesses this. He almost always left her to guess at his reasoning. He inhales deeply and then exhales quickly, his gaze making one last slow climb from her toes to her eyes. He walks forward and grabs the hem of the shirt between his ring and middle fingers at each side of her outer thighs. Pressing his palms against her skin he slides them up her sides, taking the shirt with him. He hasn't looked away from her eyes since he started walking over, and she knows that *he* knows. Not all of it, as Seamus had seen to it that no one could eavesdrop, but she's pretty sure he knows enough. Harry had looked too crazed, she had come back shaking.

She lifts her arms and his palms carry on up the length of them until the shirt clears her hands. "You wear it for ten minutes and it already smells like you," he mutters as he bundles up the cloth, tossing it to the top of his trunk. "Your scent is everywhere."

She doesn't know what to say to this, but he stops her from having to speak, pulling her against him and pressing his face to her neck. She reaches out to his shoulders, his chest and stomach expanding and contracting against hers as he

breathes her in. At least she knows it wasn't a bad smell then, and her head drops back when he starts kissing her neck. His lips move along her jaw, her cheek, and she lowers her face toward him as he pauses in front of her mouth.

She opens her eyes to look at him, and this seems to be what he had been waiting for. He reaches up, the pads of his fingertips tracing her face from her forehead to her chin. He cups her neck and slides his hands up and back, burying his fingers in her hair. She slides her own along his shoulders and then around his neck, pushing herself into him as much as she can without the ability to sink inside of him. He kisses her then, and they alternate the aggression from a slow burn that almost feels like hesitancy to a sort of mad ravaging of one another's mouths.

Hermione doesn't know how long they stand there just kissing one another. She doesn't know how he managed to get both of them on the bed without pausing. She doesn't know why he takes it slow, why he stares at her when he isn't kissing her, why he's pressed and sliding against her skin when he's thrusting into her instead of raising up on his arms. She doesn't know why she starts crying, why he stops for several seconds and presses his forehead to hers when she does, why he kisses her until she stops without asking why. She only knows that it's beautiful, so beautiful it hurts, and that it makes her feel more than she could have wished for.

There was a moment, when he had been kissing her before they made it to the bed, where she thought she should pretend they were in love. But it was gone after a second - not from lack of imagination, but because she didn't need that for this to mean something. They were just who they were, together, whatever that made. It was her and Draco, it is *them*, and that has always been good enough for her.

It is perfect. Tonight he has been all the things she wants and needs, and she is so filled up with him it somehow makes it harder for her to leave now. There is a sad, scared part of her that wishes she could just stay with the safety she feels in his arms. That she can forget the world and it can forget her. The two of them could stay in this room, and he could keep yanking her to the edge of the bed and aiming his wand at the door until the world got the point.

But that is the weak part of her, the part of her now that refuses to lift her forehead from the steady, hard thump of his heart in his chest. The part of her that has always been afraid. That part is small though, and unimportant. All humans had their weaknesses, but Hermione had never given in to hers. It was simply a flashing green light in that consuming hot whiteness that made up the rest of her. That hot white that was the force of Hermione Granger.

Draco's hand buries itself deeper into her hair and he pulls her head up for her,

leaning down to kiss her again. Her lips are sore and swollen, but she doesn't mind at all. There is a hard ball growing inside her throat when she remembers that this might be the last time she ever does this. She recalls another moment then, the night before Draco left for the Graveyard Battle. She wonders if he had felt these same things, and if that is how he knew what she needed so well.

It is an odd thing, the time spent before a big battle. The ones where you knew there was only a slim chance of making it out alright. Hermione had found herself in this situation before - contemplating the possibility of her death. But she had never gone on a mission this risky, this half-assed and blind. They were going to a nest of Death Eaters, and even with a large team of people, a map, and a damn good plan, it was still likely that not everyone would make it out alive. You still spent the time before it wondering if it was going to be you that didn't.

But the sad part, the part that had the fear bubbling inside her, was that this was a Very Bad Idea and she doesn't even know if *any* of them are going to make it out alive. She hadn't been looking toward a situation and *knowing* it would be this bad in all of war. She hasn't given up on herself or her friends, but she can feel the change within her that she hoped to never make. Hermione has now *accepted* her death. She would fight as hard as she could to live, but the truth is that she does not expect to.

It is terrifying, but in a strange way, calming. If she were to die, than that is what will happen. She does not want to, she is not ready to, but if that is the outcome, she accepts it. If it had been for any reason other than her friends, than for someone she loves, she never could have. But it's part of her nature, perhaps part of human nature, to want death to take you in place of someone you love. She might die for going tonight, but she couldn't live knowing she didn't go.

Everything is a wonder again, when you feel your time running out. The oxygen in her lungs, Draco's hand up her back, in her hair, his tongue in her mouth. The feel of his breath on her face, his hair on her forehead, the tension of his muscles, the movement of his jaw. All her senses, her gifts, her ability to feel, hear, see, smell, taste. He is new again to her - life is new again. Then, in her mind, a billion memories to remind her of her life, of what she will be losing, of what she has gained.

It is in this moment that she truly appreciates life, without reserve. Because no matter how many times she has tried to keep remembering the beauty of it throughout the war and just her life, it isn't until something tries to take it away that she is thankful for it again. That she can truly look, and know, and feel it thrum inside and around her.

"What time?"

"What?" she whispers, and he pulls his head back to look at her fully.

"What time, Hermione?"

She blushes, though she doesn't know why. Her guilt or shame, maybe. If he asks too much, she won't be able to tell him. She hopes he can forgive her for that. For not being able to find the words for goodbye, because it sounded too much like giving up. "An hour from when I walked through the door."

He looks over her head and his arm squeezes her tighter as he leans forward, swiping his watch off the empty box that served as a bedside table. "You should get dressed."

She looks at him, and this time he is slow to bring his eyes back to her. She doesn't move from the bed, and it's not just because of his arm that hasn't stopped squeezing to keep her in place. "I'll see you soon."

"Right." He doesn't believe her. She realizes that she might be the only thing Draco has left, besides his mother. But the only thing he could call a friend. She hopes this doesn't remind him of Pansy. That he's not looking at her and remembering how he couldn't do anything for her, how he couldn't save either of them. She would like to tell him he won't be alone, that other people will find the Draco she has. But it sounds too final, so she doesn't. She has not given up hope. "I don't..."

"What?" She prompts.

He waits, searching for something in her face, maybe the words he can't say. His arm loosens and then drops away, his face shutting down. Maybe he knew she had made her choice, and that it wasn't him. Maybe that is just her imagination. "You have three minutes."

She kisses him, hard and frantic, and he kisses her back, that hard blankness crumbled under the fierce press of his mouth. He squeezes her so hard her back cracks, kisses her until her head is light from lack of breath. She's almost afraid he won't let go, she's afraid that he will, and her arms burn from the force she holds him to her with. It feels impossible to leave him here, and it is impossible to stay.

She can feel him watching her as she gets dressed, and knows he can spot the trembling of her body. He's standing behind her when she turns to look at him

again, and he reaches out, tying the Phoenix band around her arm.

"Potter's the hero... be smart." She doesn't know if he's telling her to stay or just being offensive. "Don't fuck this one up, Granger."

He kisses her, briefly, and her chest collapses and she can't breathe again.

Day: 1466; Hour: 5

The moment their feet hit the ground they begin to run. The woods are thick and it's still dark out, save the bouncing light of Harry's flashlight he told them to follow. They still stumble over holes, bang into trees, and the branches and bushes smack and scratch their skin. They all fly through it without caring, hardly noticing it past their determination. It's an assault from nature, but it smells like summer, and she has to keep herself from thinking of better things.

Whoever is behind her steps on the back of her shoes and she falls forward, grabbing someone's shirt on instinct and all three of them crash to the ground. It must have been raining earlier, because the twigs and leaves that stick to her hand and cheek are wet. The person she pulled down is male, judging by the way they so easily push her up and off of them. The person behind her is female, judging by the light touch of apology to her shoulder and the soft pants for air.

She realizes two things upon standing: Harry's flashlight has gone out, and they are still in the wizarding world. She can feel the strength of the wards ahead of them, radiating magic. She isn't sure if they are that strong or if it's just because she hadn't been expecting the feel of it to tingle along her skin. She knows they are in Italy, one of the few countries where Muggle and Half-bloods are extreme rarities, but she never thought they would turn a blind eye to Death Eaters. And they had to have been - in the country, surrounded by wards, and as a training camp no doubt filled with Unforgivables, the government had to know. She didn't know much about what had been going on at the Ministry of Magic, though she had heard Italy wanted no part in the war. But they had to have known that ignoring the presence of Death Eaters in your country would cause problems.

They were probably hoping someone else took care of it. They probably had their bank accounts full and Death Eater puppet strings attached to their joints. As a nation filled with Purebloods, if they were to take a side, it wouldn't likely be hers. These are things Hermione has either learned about the world or has imagined through the eyes of cynicism. She doesn't care either way, she just knows that she is angry. If the government had done something about it, maybe Ron would already be home. Maybe she wouldn't be throwing her life down and hoping she could fight

hard enough and be lucky enough to take it back.

"We're going to have to take the wards down," Harry's voice is so low it's almost lost in their breath and the creaking of branches in the wind. "As soon as we start trying, they will be on to us."

Hermione is suddenly struck with the dire urge to turn and run away. She thought she stopped being such a coward a long time ago. Then, Harry's hand at the side of her neck, and she remembers why she came. "Are we going to go in groups?"

"No. There's not enough of us, we stay together, take 'em out as they come. I'm putting up anti-Apparition wards if I can, we don't need another Dalin fiasco." Harry sounds bitter, and she has no idea what the Dalin fiasco is. "Remember, the prisoners are probably underground, so if we see stairs leading down, that's where we're going. As soon as we get them, we all take my Portkey out. We'll find and fight the rest of *them* another day, with a bigger team."

"Alright. Everyone ready?" Ginny's voice, sounding scared but brave. They were all fools, Hermione thinks, Draco was right. But *Ron, Ron, Ron*.

"Hermione, Justin - take the wards when we get there."

The Death Eaters are the ones who break them. The wards are far too intricate of magic for Hermione and Justin, untrained, to not take at least hours trying to break them. Nothing is allowed past the wards, not even spells -- they find that out when five men come running at them through the dusk. They seem confused until four others join them, three of them dismantling the wards while the other six hold aim. Hermione can hear shouting in the direction of the large grey building that towers halfway through the field in front of them, and at least ten silhouettes appear out of its shadow.

This is it, she thinks. *We didn't even make it past the wards*.

They can feel the wards break the moment they do, a sort of relief in pressure. Spells are cast simultaneously from both sides - all green from theirs, and an array of colors from the Death Eaters. Harry flings himself out of the way of the Killing Curse, and a man screams something in Italian. Hermione isn't sure if he's finished his sentence before he falls, laying with the other six they had managed to hit before that.

All of them but two are new recruits. They had found that out from captured Death Eaters. New recruits were dressed in more shabby clothing until they earned

proper treatment. The ones who were especially quick to learn, talented in Death Eater obedience and society misconduct, "earned" the mask of other fallen Death Eaters. It was some sort of honor for them. Pansy's father's mask is now buried in the mud again. Hermione knows this because of the strange blue crack down the cheek, because it had been the first time she had seen Draco kill someone she knew *he* knew. Because she had never gotten the hatred that twisted Draco's face out of her mind. There wasn't any not believing in that.

The other two fall before they even get a spell off. Justin and Seamus bind them and Angelina shoves a Portkey to the Ministry on them. They were all going to have to be careful with their spells tonight. Magic in abundance is extremely draining, and they all know they will have to do it in abundance tonight anyway. But spells like the Killing Curse took so much away that if they used it too often they would find themselves unable to lift an arm let alone summon magic.

They yell Stunning spells at the approaching figures as soon as they seem close enough, their voices mingling into a jumble of noise. Someone throws up a blocking spell but it's pointless, the distance proving too great, and giving too much time to move out of the way. It only takes three seconds of each side charging at the other before they all cast again.

Hermione can see the light of her Stunning spell before a body blocks her view. She only has enough time to register that it's one of the Death Eater corpses and that there are two more that fly out in front of them. Then there is just the explosion of green against the lifeless forms, and then blood. Blood, and limbs, and all parts of the body she has never wanted to know in such a way. The fragments of life scatter in the field between the two lines of enemies, coloring the grass in streaks and pools of red. Someone is gagging, and she knows she's not the only one. It's not the blood that bothers her so much anymore - it's the *pieces*.

The corpses were not their friends, and they were not people they knew. So it is them who take advantage of the pause in shock, and it isn't until seven of the Death Eaters are Stunned that the other four remember what this is. Justin hits the ground, but she can just barely tell who he is from the raw sound of his screaming. Another voice joins his, a woman's, and then Angelina's blood slashes across Hermione's cheek.

She does not have time to look, but the panic hitches higher in her heart, and her breathing comes in and goes out in tiny little huffs and gasps. She throws up a shield, this one not too late, as colors fly past her. Two of them drop, more come out of the building, Hermione's foot slides in blood, and Justin begins screaming again.

Thirty

Day: 1466; Hour: 6

Hermione doesn't know how they made it to the side of the building, but she doesn't waste time thinking about it. Angelina is at St. Mungo's by now as long as Ginny's violently shaking hand dug out the right Portkey. Lavender grimaces every time she moves too much from the Cruciatus she took, and Justin is still twitching from the two that hit him, though he refuses to leave. Hermione's arm is bleeding from some curse that only skimmed her, and she can feel her blood thumping under the Phoenix band she wrapped around it. That's all she knows from the short survey she took on the group, and when she asks about their health, they all reply "fine".

"Why are they all recruits? Wouldn't they send the--" Justin starts, his voice raising each time his body jerks.

"I don't know. We need a way in. Door is suicide, take us out one by one." Harry sounds angry, because that is what he needs to be.

Their backs are all pressed against the metal of the building, lined up like a firing squad. It's the safest way, as their backs aren't exposed, and their fronts are fairly protected by scanning eyes and raised wands. "Why haven't more come out? If this is a training--"

"A way in," Harry reminds Ginny of their priorities. "Did anyone see windows?"

"There's none on this side, but there has to be something," Justin whispers, his free hand soothing circles on his hip, trying to ease the nerves still twitching with memory.

"The vent!" Hermione is so excited by this that she almost forgets where they are. "There's smoke coming from the roof, and if something is coming out, it's likely something can get in."

"I didn't see smoke." Lavender looks up at the sky.

"Could have been mist, it was raining--" Ginny cuts herself off, and Hermione realizes that the strange weightlessness that takes over her is not from blood loss, or the twenty-four hours without sleep, but from Harry levitating her.

"Genius, Hermione. Even if there's nothing up there, it gives us a position for..." Harry's voice fades away as she rises out of earshot.

She turns, squatting with her wand raised, but she doesn't see anyone on the roof when her eyes clear the wall. She grabs the ledge and brings both of her knees to the floor before signaling for Harry to break the spell, throwing herself away from the ledge. The roof is clear from what she can see, and there are three wide cylinders raised up from the steel. She looks over the ledge of the roof and meets Harry's eyes, gesturing over her shoulder and giving him a thumbs up. Hermione runs toward one of the cylinders, then feels the rust stain her hands with a strange texture as she grabs the rim, peering over.

"What is it?" She jerks forward at Seamus behind her, and they both freeze as her wand hits the steel, a hollowed, hard sound echoing out around them.

She waits until there isn't any reaction around them before speaking, but Seamus keeps his wand moving across an empty roof. "A vent. It has a huge fan in it, but I think we can fit through the gaps. It's not spinning. We're going to fall, though, and I don't know how far down or into what."

A sound like thunder stops Seamus from replying, and they both look up toward the sky before the screaming starts. Seamus gets to the ledge before her, casting something at the ground, and she can see the back of Dean's head appear before Seamus wraps his arms under the other man's. He digs his heels down and throws both of them back, and she can hear them grunt behind her as she looks down at the field.

Three people are running across the field in the front of them, two more coming from the left, and another is falling through the sky. Hermione stuns one of them before she is yanked back, stumbling over her feet. Dean makes sure she is balanced before letting go of her arm.

"He said to go."

"What?"

"Harry said to go and clear the door."

Hermione blinks at him in surprise long enough for him to reach for her arm again. "I am not leaving them! The--"

"Harry said to go, Hermione! They shot something at me on my way up, they know

we're up here, and they're going to be coming after us. Harry wants him and the others to take them down before they can, so it's *our* job to get in and clear the door!"

"We weren't supposed to split up! We'll be too outnumbered, they'll be too-- I'm *not* leaving them, we'll just--"

"*Yes*, you are," Dean bites, gone the calm man she knew, and grabs her arm to drag her toward the cylinder. "They're waiting for us to clear the door, so--"

"Stop dragging me around!" Hermione yanks away from him, turning to give him a glare, and there is a part of herself that is expecting to see Draco there instead.

"Orders, Hermione. If we don't go and clear the door--" He cuts himself off, a knowing in his eyes that she hates.

Hermione digs the heel of her palm into her forehead, pressing hard against her skull, as if she can drive the right answer into her head. But there isn't a right answer in this - there are two things that she has to do, and neither one of them could work if she attempted the other. They need to clear the door for the rest to get inside - it is the whole reason they are staying on the ground, getting rid of some of the enemies and buying them time.

"We could wait until--"

"There can't be any waiting, Hermione, you know that. This is our only opportunity--"

"Before they get to the roof," she finishes softly, her eyes burning with how hard she stares at the ledge.

A circle of metal webbing hits the ground, still burning with color around the edges from the Severing spell. Seamus braces himself to jump over the ledge, and gives them a fleeting look. "Follow in right after me. We don't know what's down there."

"Be careful," she tells him, though she doesn't think it's necessary for him to hear this.

He jumps the ledge, narrowly missing the fan blades, and she hears the pang before she notices that he's not gone. He gives a cautious and surprised look to the blade in front of his neck before looking up at them. "Not that deep then."

He's careful to sink to his knees and his head disappears in the darkness before Hermione follows. Her need to be quick for her friends waiting below, and perhaps a lack of stealth, lands her feet on one of the blades instead of through the gap. It bends under her weight and she falls forward, her chest hitting another blade and her arms dangling into the darkness. If she weren't so afraid then she might have been embarrassed, but instead pulls her legs forward and pushes herself back, her feet hitting the vent under her. She lowers herself until she feels it beneath her hands and then crawls forward, deeper into the darkness. She can hear Dean drop down and then start toward them, and begins moving again herself when the breathing in front of her grows more distant.

She checks Seamus's ankles to know which way to move, following in the direction that they point toward. He pauses sometimes, and she knows that he's reaching out, trying to feel the corners in search of the way toward the front of the building. They pass vents to rooms, or corridors, or nothing at all, but there are no lights and just the feel of the bars grinding into her knees.

It feels like it's an hour that they spend trying to crawl as quick and quietly as possible, but it's probably only been minutes. She's worried, and urges Seamus to go faster by pushing on the back of his shoes, but he doesn't. If more Death Eaters showed up on the field and there had only been four of her friends...four of them...just four.

The blackness around them gradually becomes lighter until Seamus's face is lit up. He stops, looking down into the vent, but the conversation below is too soft for her to hear. Hermione has to remind herself to breathe, too afraid the noise of it will alert the people below, and she realizes the major problem with her entry plan. Seamus could fire off curses, but if the Death Eaters heard even a squeak, she and Dean would be blown away as the Death Eaters shot out the ceiling. The thought makes her stop breathing again.

She hopes none of them make a sound. She hopes Seamus thinks about the impossibility of them defending themselves against more than maybe two enemies, and doesn't do anything stupid. They couldn't call for backup, they couldn't protect themselves. *Don't be stupid. Don't be a hero.* The thought thrusts a memory forward, and she thinks of Draco. *Potter's the hero...be smart.* Her eyes go wide as her mind pieces together what he might have meant. Because they could call for backup. Lupin would figure it out if she activated the coin with the magical location in Italy. He would have to know. Granted, she would be putting him and whoever else at risk, and they would almost be forced to come into a situation they weren't ready for and that Hermione and them had created, but...

Hermione's thoughts erupt into a consuming blankness in her mind when Seamus shoves his wand through the grate and casts two Stunning spells in quick succession. She stares at him in shock as he whispers another spell viciously under his breath, a mingling of hisses and growls. "Get ready."

Hermione can hear a popping and ripping sound before the vent begins caving under her. She scrambles to pull her feet under her as much as possible, and then the vent gives way, all three of them falling, their bodies unfurling in the air. Seamus lands on top of a table, Dean on his bum, and she hits the ground on the tip of her trainers before crashing to her hands and knees.

She's up on her feet in a second, her bones groaning and knees sagging in protest as her wand swings wildly around the room. It's empty, save for the two young women Seamus had Stunned. She can actually feel Dean's anger mirroring her own as he steps up beside her.

"What the fuck was that?"

"We would have been wandering around for days in that maze. There were only two, was I supposed to alert them to our--"

Hermione sucks in air so hard it comes out as a high-pitched whine. A boy, no older than seventeen, is sitting on a chair in the corner, between a wall and a dresser. His head is lowered, blond fringe falling into eyes that stare into her own with one of the most intense looks of hatred she has ever received. Her mind flashes on serial killers and evil spirits - he looks murderous, his body bound to the chair and only his hands coated to the wrist in blood. He had not been there a second ago, she is sure of it.

"You're the traitor?" Hermione has no idea what Seamus is talking about, and the boy does not reply.

"Leave him," Dean whispers, and there is a stampede of feet coming outside the door, marching closer to the rhythm of her hammering heart. "They might be on their way outside or something. But if someone opens the door, start casting."

"We should cut them off then. That many… Harry and--"

"We'll…" Seamus turns his head toward her and she can only register a look on his face. She doesn't have time to think about what it is because he's suddenly in front of her, his fingers digging into her arms, and spinning both of them with the momentum of his weight. She hears a loud voice that circles her as they spin, but a

wall has covered her eardrums, making sound numb.

There is an explosive fear in the color of his eyes and the lines on his face, and then it is gone. Just an absence of emotion as one moment they are drilling into hers and the next they are unfocused. His fingers go completely slack on her arms and he crashes into her with such force that they hit the ground and skid halfway across the room.

She watches his hair blow out from his scalp at her release of breath, the strands that aren't sticking in the sweat at his temple. His body is warm on top of hers, hard at the shoulders and soft at the stomach. His skin is sweaty and hot on his arms, where her hands are squeezing. His hair smells like the shampoo from the hotel they had been at when Justin lost the Portkeys, because the safe houses were usually out of the stuff, he had said. But he also smells of sweat, musk, the dusty inside of the vents, and...and Dark Magic.

Then he is gone, his weight lifted and gone from the shocked gaze she keeps on the ceiling. Dean's face appears above her own and he grabs the top of her arms, hauling her to her feet. Her weight is without support, her legs without strength, and she sinks down. The top of her shoes scrape against the floor and her knees hover, Dean's grip the only thing holding her up. He pulls her up again until her face is level with us, and he's saying something that she can't hear. He is shaking, or she is, and his face is starting to shine in the strange movements of light. Her ears are blocked off, only hearing the whine of silence and distant muffled noise.

She slowly gets her feet under her, and Dean begins to shake her, jerking her body when her eyes drop to the floor, searching. He jerks her harder, back and forth, and her teeth bite down into her tongue. The pain brings back the sound. "...leave me, got it? I need you. Our friends need you. You've got..."

His head turns sharply toward the door and he drops a hand from her to wrap his arm around her waist, stepping around her, and she can feel his chest against her back. His hand comes up to cover her mouth, and she realizes that there's a strange whining coming from her throat. He drags them back and they're both jerked by the small impact of his back meeting the wall. They're both facing the door, Dean's wand pointed out in front of them, and his hand over her mouth clenches and stops her from turning her face down. Turning her face down to the floor, down to Seamus, stops her from seeing.

But she already knows. She knows because of the look in his eyes, because of the way it all went frozen and blank. She knows because he hadn't moved, because he still isn't. Because she has seen death before, and she knows what it looks like the

moment it comes, the moment it leaves, and what it leaves behind for them to keep. She knows because when Dean bends his head to whisper in her ear, the wetness on his cheeks are tears. His chest is trembling with them, and his voice hitches, and she thinks he's only holding on because she's so determined to let go.

"Get it together, Hermione. He died so you can live. Don't waste it, do you understand? Don't you dare fucking waste it. I'll kill you if you do. I'll fucking--" Then a gurgle of noise in his throat, and a sob kept trapped in his throat as his body heaved.

He lets her move her head now, and it's when she's searching that she finds the tears obscuring her vision this time. She blinks them down her cheeks to be with the others, and she swallows past the dryness of her throat. Dean must have flip him - he's facing upward, a statue, his face a still-life. Dead. He's dead. Seamus Finnigan gave his life for her, and now he's *dead*. Her knees go out again, but she catches herself.

That isn't Seamus. It's just some other person. It's some *other person*. It was *that* simple. Later, when they all got back to the safe house, they would have to do reports, and someone would write a letter about this man's death. Some little letter, some hand delivery, some broken family who had hoped too much. Some useless explanation about that elusive *greater good*, and *the cause*, and that sorrow-filled, duty-bound, world-weight they pumped into sacks of skin and erected as heroes.

Wake up, Hermione, she thinks, but it's in Ron's voice, some memory from too many years ago. *Wake up.*

Ron is here. Somewhere inside this building that she is inside now too, so very close. Harry, Ginny, Lavender, and Justin are outside, fighting off who knew how many and waiting for them. Dean, trying to hold it together and losing. They all needed her, and they all needed her now. *Don't you dare fucking waste it.*

Hermione breathes in deep, chokes on saliva and tears, and pries Dean's arm off of her. She can hear it then, people running past the door, a tempo to *hurry. hurry.* She runs forward and hits her knees at Seamus's side, her breath hitching as the prelude to tears that she forces to be the end. For now. For now because she's not going to fucking waste it.

"You're so stupid," she whispers like a breath. "So stupid, Seamus."

She is so sorry. She feels so incredibly sorry. Just as guilt-ridden as if she had killed him herself. But that is okay, because this isn't really him. This is a dream. It

is someone who looks like him. It is just some poor kid who grew up into a war. It is bad timing, a curse, the burden of a generation who never asked for it but did something about it anyway. It certainly isn't *Seamus*, the person she has known for all these years. It isn't *allowed* to be.

The ultimate sacrifice so that she might live. There isn't a thing in the world she can do to show how thankful she was, how much she wished he hadn't. Except live, maybe…maybe that. Sorrow, guilt, determination, and anger collide to become a fierce emotion within her. Her hands are shaking and numb when she unties the Phoenix band from his arm, and she bends to kiss his forehead on instinct. Her tears mingle with the drying sweat there, and then she is pulled away, pushed aside. Dean takes the Phoenix band from her fingers, and she notices the violent tremble in his own, the constant heave of his shoulders.

This isn't Seamus. *It can't be Seamus*, but it is, and there isn't any changing that. She can't change it for anything, but there is still a part of her that is *screaming* how it couldn't be real. She reaches out a hand, catching cooling fingers between her own, and her thoughts become a chorus of apology. She can barely hear Dean through the bang of her heart and fast thoughts, but she knows he is whispering something. Goodbye, she thinks, or regret.

Dean pulls back, and when he does, the shaking of his shoulders has stopped. He ties the orange band around Seamus' eyes as Hermione places the redhead's hand over the stillness of his heart. Her body is a mess of disbelief and mangled nerves, but she stands to her feet with another emotion, so black and overpowering that it rides over any other emotion inside of her. *Revenge*. The man that killed Seamus with the curse meant for her is dead, laying on the ground beneath the blown out vent. But she looks at his face, studies it, because she has never had to chance to see the Death Eater that killed any of her friends. Suddenly, the man has killed every one of them. Suddenly, every Death Eater has the same face. There is an animalistic hatred that swelters up along the tissues of her heart. It makes her feel reckless, rubbed raw and *violent*. She might never step out of this building again, but she was going to fight hard until the end.

"We can't stay in here," Dean whispers when the footsteps start fading from the hall.

Hermione is cut off from replying by a knocking sound, and looks over at the boy in the chair. His head stops hitting the wall when he has their attention and he jerks his head toward the dresser. Hermione stares at him and he does it again, his face impatient.

"I say we tail the crowd. Get as many as we can from behind, as long as there aren't too many to begin with. If we fire off quickly enough, we can take the rest when they notice."

"Let's go."

Hermione gives another fleeting look toward the dresser before following behind Dean, his face blank and body stiff. Shutdown Mode, she calls it sometimes. When there's nothing there but the fighter. He checks both sides before they both take off in the direction the group had went. They follow the sound of feet and yelling as silently as possible, but she doubts any of the Death Eaters can hear them over their own noises. She's reminded that the place is filled with new recruits, which also happens to be the only ones she has encountered. The worst of them had probably left the moment the wards were tampered with and left the new ones to fend off the intruders. It was probably like a final test before training completion - if you lived, you passed.

It makes her even angrier that some training Death Eater was the one to kill Seamus. Seamus could have killed him first, but it would have been after Hermione died herself. He had made the decision in a second. To... She refuses to think about it. She clutches to the anger instead, the fuel of revenge that drives her, that pulled her back from the breakdown.

"You just killed Avot! You just fucking well killed him!" yells someone around the corner, and Hermione and Dean both pull to a stop.

"I didn't know!"

Someone yells the Killing Curse and panic, anger, and shock ring out along the walls. Dean looks at her and she nods, both of them turning the corner at the same time. She casts so quickly that she can actually feel her strength begin to drain. There are eight on the floor by the time the five remaining find them. One steps back and half-turns as if to run before noticing there are only two of his enemies. Hermione sends out a Stunning spell with Dean's Binding charm before they both dart back around the corner. Spells collide with the wall and a chunk is torn out of the corner. Hermione can feel the aftershocks of magic brush across her cheek, and they both turn the corner again at someone yelling out a Reviving charm.

Hermione doesn't even feel the curse that hits her until her body locks. Panic races through her as she tries to move and can't, and there is a sick feeling of *invasion* within her mind. *Kill your--* The thought, *someone else's thought*, rips itself from her mind as Dean yanks her back around the corner.

"F. M. I'm--"

"Hermione."

She turns a horrified look toward Dean, the feeling of being invaded slow to leave. Her most guarded, trusted sanctuary, stolen from her. It was just a second, but long enough to make her feel *dirty* and sick to her stomach. Her nausea only increased when she sees the blood seeping through Dean's fingers, clenched to his cheek.

"Stitch it."

"St-- I'm not very good at..."

Dean moves is hand so only two fingertips are pressed against his cheek, and the other half of the wound *folds* open, peeling away from his face to reveal tissue and more blood. The darker red, the line of the cut, runs down his face, and she has a feeling that if he were to let it flap open she would see tissue and the inside of his mouth. She hurries, pressing her fingers into his cheek and pulling the skin up to seal it with a healing charm. The scar will probably be thick and jagged later, but neither one of them are worrying about that.

They turn the corner again, all Binding charms this time. The Death Eaters had been busy reviving or cutting binds, and there are now five from the two that had been left before Dean yanked her around the corner, Hermione binds one and aims for the second, the Blocking charm Dean shouts coming too late for the spell that hits her. She can actually hear her bones crunch in her shoulder before she screams out. Inside her head, it's like watching a Bludger smashing into the wall of Hogwarts. Dean drops the block at the sound, and a jet of yellow stabs into her right above the wrist, slicing up her arm and moving over, just reaching her hip when it's gone. She sees a world of red, black, and all senses but the *feeling* leave her for several seconds. All but the very one she wanted to leave the most.

She has to remind herself to move, and she whips back into the relative safety of the other hall. Dean shouts the Killing Curse before joining her. "Okay?"

His voice comes out strange, like he had just visited the dentist. He's numb, she thinks, his body reacting to the wound on his face. Numbness is something she wishes for now, unable to stop making small injured noises. Her left arm is beginning to numb or just growing used to the stinging burn, she doesn't know. The blood is still flowing out of her arm and hip judging by the pounding sensations there, the trail of liquid, the wetness soaking her jeans.

Dean turns the corner again and she has to reach with her left hand to grab her wand out of the right. She doesn't know if she can even move her right arm, but it isn't something she wants to try. The pain is almost blinding, an eruption of fire inside of her that reminds her of too many bad things.

"Lost surprise. They're coming down the hall, know we're outnumbered. Cast to kill, *now*," Dean whispers urgently, and Hermione tenses her arm, the pain shooting out like star bursts as they both whip around the corner. The deep smell of Dark Magic burns her nostrils, waters her eyes.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" They both scream the words, and the magic and strength it takes from her has her knees buckling.

Black edges her vision and she moves her right arm, just enough to send jolts of pain searing up her neck and into her brain, just enough to make her gasp back into alertness. They pull back around the corner again, but there are still six left, all of the ones alive now revived and advancing on them. Her right arm is useless, her arm and hip bleeding so heavily that blood is dripping off her fingers, sliding down her leg, coating her wand. There is no time to stitch it; both she and Dean are leaning against the wall from the energy so much magic and injury has robbed of them, and there are several footsteps hurrying down another hall close by.

This is it. This is where she will die. Dean laughs, bitterly, an ugly sound, and his lips are wet with blood in the sweat at her temple as he kisses her there. "I'll take the left, you take the right?"

Him take the ones they were fighting, her take the ones who were coming. He knew it was over - his kiss was goodbye. Hermione shakes her head, one last plan in her mind. It hadn't worked out so well for her the first time, but at least she survived it. She casts the charm for the smoke, forcing her magic to focus and push out of her wand, and it folds them into dark grey in two seconds. *Let them kill each other*, she thinks, and knocks her left shoulder into Dean. She slides off her shoes and sticks close to the wall, sliding sideways as the footsteps pause to either side of them. Dean hisses as he trips over her shoes, but she can hear a faint squeak that has her guessing he's taking his off as well.

She bends to pick them up, continuing to creep farther down the hall until the whispers stop from around the corner, footsteps taking their place. She throws her shoe to her left, to the end of the hall, grinding her teeth to keep from crying out at the pain. Yells and colors come to life as it smacks off something far away from them, and Hermione and Dean walk quickly in the opposite direction.

She remembers a door on the other side of the hall and that is where they will hide. In these situations, Hermione does not think herself above hiding - not when there wasn't another choice. She still had to find her friends. They had been waiting so long, and she knows they are still waiting, because she has to believe that. She absolutely has to.

Hermione hisses when Dean's fingers touch the cut on her arm and then travel down, taking the shoe out of her hand. He throws it, another bang against the wall, another slew of spells, and his arm brushes hers as he runs forward. She runs with him, her face screwed up in pain as she tries to hold her arm as still as possible. Her left is still swinging though, and hits against something hard enough for her wand to drop, her grip slippery with her blood and lack of strength.

She turns wide eyes toward the hardness at her side, knowing she is in the middle of an open hall and that Dean has disappeared into the smoke in front of her. A hand presses into the side of her mouth, most of the fingers on her cheek, and it's the dash of orange on the dark figure that has her choking back a startled sound. Another hand reaches up, waving at the smoke as they bend closer, and though her mind is running through how Harry and them managed to get inside, it is Rogers face that appears before her own.

His expression is angry, hers is shocked. He stops waving his hand, holding up a zero, five fingers, then two. He cocks his head and shakes it, questioning, and Hermione thinks she knows enough of what he's asking to raise five fingers, pull them in, and raise one more. Rogers stares at the blood coating her hand and then gives a solid nod, looking up at the dark figures moving slowly around them. All of them have orange bands around their arms. Hermione didn't feel the coin activate, but doesn't care about how at this point.

Rogers' face is swimming before her, and she knows it's not just from the smoke. She knows because there is a haze taking over her mind, an odd drifting feeling in her bones, and not even twitching her shoulder is bringing her back. She's thinking of a way to try and communicate about Harry when Rogers stares too long over her head and turns on his heel, burrowing into the smoke. Hermione stands, swaying on her feet, feeling as if she is in a dream. The numbing pain, the smoke clouding everything, the phantom shadows of people all around her. How often has she dreamed this?

An arm wraps around her waist, gentle, and she jumps, reaching up to push it off as screaming erupts somewhere in front of her. The odd moment of relief at seeing backup has vanished, replaced again with fear. The arm tightens in response, and as she digs her nails into it, bending to pick up her wand, another arm hits the back of

her knees. Her scream with the movement of her shoulder as she is picked up only blends into the others, and her voice is raw over the waves of pain. She doesn't even notice the pull of a Portkey until she opens her eyes again, clear air blurred by the tears of her sobbing.

"*Fuck, Granger*."

This grabs her attention, dragging her from the darkness of agony pulling her under, and she blinks up at the smear of a face and platinum hair. *His face*. The one she left in the room, that she… It can't matter right now. She blinks rapidly, clearing her vision, and groans at the sway of pain. "Take me back."

"Are you fucking *serious*?" He looks furious, and she doesn't care. "No wonder Lupin said not to just let you Port--"

"Put her on the bed, Malfoy." Someone behind her head.

"No! No, Harry, Ginny--"

"They're fi--"

"No!"

"We found them under a fucking porch by the front door, *alive* and *fine*." He only seems to be growing more angry, and though he's careful to lay her on the bed, she still cries out anyway.

Her head is tilted back and though the taste of the pain relief potion is utterly disgusting, it is sugar to her because it means *relief*. She breathes in deep, exhales, and when she breathes in again the pain is fading away from her. Her eyes begin to drop in response, but she struggles to stay awake, finding Draco at the side of her bed.

His blue shirt is black with blood down the chest on his right and down his stomach on the left. From her, she thinks, *my blood*. "Promise?" Because she would never forgive him for lying.

His lips pull thin again, but his knuckles are gentle when they skim over her eyes. It feels physically impossible to open them again. "Potter, Weasley, and Brown are alive."

She falls into her exhaustion.

Thirty-One

Day: 1467; Hour: 6

She wakes up to Lupin beside her bed. He looks like he's contemplating something sinister, his face shadowed with the weak light of the candle at her bedside. When he finds her awake a dozen emotions pass across his features, though she doesn't know which ones are real and what the flickers of light have put there. Dawn is breaking through the high windows that mark the makeshift infirmary at Malfoy Manor. Her shoulder is sore and stiff when she tests it, but most of the pain is gone. She can feel the stickiness of potions on her hip and arm, the scratch of bandages, but she knows they are on their way to healing as well.

The memories are sharp, fast, and they hurt. "Where is Justin?"

She coughs through the dryness of her throat, and Lupin waits before answering. "I'm sorry."

Hermione lets her head fall back against the pillows, breathing out through her teeth and closing her eyes against the tears. "God."

"Brown has lost an arm. We would have grown it back, but she waited too long, and there's nothing we can do now. She refused to leave Harry and Ginny. They didn't know about Finnigan, so I'm guessing that you do."

She nods, the tears escaping the tightness of her eyelids, and she has to swallow five times to be able to speak through the thick, burning knot. "The rest are okay, though? Dean?"

"Everyone else is fine, recovering. Dean's going to have a bad scar on his face, and another across his stomach. Another five minutes and he would have died - the curse to his stomach nicked one of his organs. He--"

"But he's okay?" *Justin, Seamus, Justin*. Justin, *oh God*, he was going to be a *father* . He was nervous, and scared, and rambling with his stupid grin, and he was going to be *great dad*.

"He's okay - I can't say how any of you are holding up mentally, though. It was very stupid, what you did. If Malfoy hadn't come to the Manor and then tracked me down in the middle of another mission, you would all be dead."

She almost can't grasp it through the dizzy spin of her head, through all that pressure of the war sitting on her chest, through the image of Justin in their youth, with his school tie and arms full of books. Would he have a son? Would his *child* know *anything* about the man, the *great man* his father was, and what he gave, and what it was supposed to mean? Ust had hardly even known him - how was his child supposed to? How was his child ever supposed to comprehend how deep the injustice of this war went? It *stole* him from that baby, from her, from them, from the *world*.

"Draco told you?" she chokes out, lifting her palm to her forehead, shaking under her thin hospital sheet.

Draco, *don't be stupid*, the nervous wringing of Justin's hands, Seamus all full of life to the brim of his skin and then gone.

"From what I understand, he stayed at the Manor for about twenty minutes, holding the coin in his hand. Minerva told me he seemed to be waiting for something, but refused to say anything. He caved when none of you activated the coin, I'm guessing. Minerva and Malfoy tracked me down to see if I knew where you had all went. As soon as I saw Malfoy across the street, I already knew. I should have known when I saw Harry after the interrogation. Should have known you two well enough."

"Is... Did we--"

"We found Ron. He's at Mungo's. He's alive."

The emotions become too much, and they take complete control over her. Suddenly, she is sobbing, shaking, a mess, and she doesn't care. She has waited too long to do this, holding off and burying it within her. It wins now, owning her, and she needs it to. But there is still some sort of strange, disgusting shame that makes the edges of her grief so much sharper. You weren't supposed to break down in war. You were supposed to be stronger than a human being could possibly be. You were supposed to get used to this, to take death and loss as naturally as breath, and it was supposed to get *easier*. It wasn't allowed to *hurt. This. Badly.*

There was a tragic burning to her gut and her heart, and these shocks of hope and relief that only made it all feel so much worse. There were dark, horrible thoughts that screamed from the back of her mind about sacrifice, consequences, and worth, and they came with bitterness and guilt. They came at the edge of a storm that had her sobbing so hard that she couldn't breathe, leaving her in a state of silent, violent shaking.

She pushed her hand under her pillow, curling it over her face, trying to hide from too many things. Lupin's hand touched down on her arm, and she pulled away from it, pulled into herself, and was lost.

Day: 1467; Hour: 14

Harry hugs her, careful of her shoulder and her arm in the sling. She hated wearing the thing, but they told her she had to keep movement to a minimum. "That scar is pretty terrible."

She looks down at the rough line halfway up her left arm. She found another, shorter, on her hip. The one on her arm is the ugliest one she has, and she hates it, but keeps it anyway. It reminds of Seamus, of her ability to still scar. "Thanks, Harry."

He smiles, disarming and boyish, and it forces her to smile back, but it gets stuck in a meaningless position on her face. She searches his eyes for things that she needs in this moment, but she only finds one, and it isn't enough. She wanted some sign of understanding, of grief, of knowing by the *feel* of it how much this cost them.

They died for Ron. They died for her. They died for Harry.

"Are you okay?" he asks in the way that says he knows she isn't.

His chin bobs down a little, trying to catch her eyes as they lower, but she doesn't give in. "No."

"I... I know, with... I never wanted anyone to die, Hermione. I--"

"I didn't say you did, Harry. I just--"

"It was the only way. If we could have all made it out alive, I--" *We could have waited just a little while, we could have gotten a bigger team, we could have activated the coin, we could have not split up, we could have...*

"He was going to be a dad."

"What?"

"Justin." She looked up at the ceiling through the blur, sniffed, shook her head like *no, don't believe this, I'm not really crying again.* "He'll never know I was right. He'll never..." *Anything. He'll never* anything.

Harry grabbed the top of her arm with gentle fingers, and she wanted to flinch away from it. Just at first, just off instinct, and she was angry with herself. He would have taken it as blame, and he doesn't deserve that. Not from her. They had all agreed. They knew the cost, the risk, and they had all agreed. *Why had they agreed, why had they--*

"I know," Harry whispers, and he pulls her into him, the hand sliding to wrap an arm around her shoulders. "If I could have saved him... If I could save *all of them*. But I can't. None of us can, so we have to settle for what we do save. And we saved Ron, Hermione. We saved him, and now he's here. Our Ron. Don't... It wasn't your choice. It wasn't like you decided for them. And--"

"It doesn't make me feel--"

"There wasn't anything else we could do. If we would have waited, Ron could have been dead, or--"

"But now Seamus and Justin are." Harry stiffens against her, gone from warmth or anything soft. "Dean is scarred for life, lost his best friend. Lavender lost an *arm*. Seamus and Justin are *dead*. Dead, dead, dead. They are--"

"Hermi--"

"What is one life compared to two others? What--"

"*Herm*--" Harry snaps back from her, and she only meets his eyes for a second, just long enough to see the accusation and shock.

"We made that decision, Harry! You, me, Ginny. Seamus, yes, fine, maybe, though he ended up dying for *me*. And Justin? He was hardly on speaking terms with Ron, *ever*. He didn't die for Ron, Harry! So who did he die for? *Us*? Because we needed all the help we could get, and you..."

She stops herself, pressing the back of her hand to her mouth, trying to stop all those dark thoughts from coming out. She has no control. She is overloaded with a hundred different emotions that stretch out all space inside of her until she is bursting, and breaking, and ripping apart.

And Harry sounds like he is there too, because his voice is so heavy and tight, like he's speaking around the knife she just shoved in his chest. "And I *what*?"

She wouldn't blame him. She would take every ounce of it first, because he gave

himself too much already. If *this*, inside of her now, was what he had carried for so long... "And you know that I love Ron. That it wouldn't take me a second to give my life for his. But I just wish it had been me, and--"

"*What*? Are you fuc--"

"And not them! I feel like I didn't win this. Like I don't have the right to look at Ron, because it wasn't *me* who--"

"Hermione," he whispers, and the fear in his tone makes her look, makes her pull herself back together in a disorganized mess of feeling and body. His eyes are wide, green sparks against a pale face. "After all these years that you've told me not to blame myself for things I could not control, and now you're doing it. Justin, Seamus - as much as it *hurts*, they made *their choice* to go. We all knew what could happen. They knew they didn't have to. They died for what they believe in, even if it isn't fair, or--"

"They all die, Harry." She sounds broken, and maybe she was. Maybe she can't keep pretending anymore, just for now. "Everyone I love, everyone I grow to care about... It just keeps *taking, and taking from me*. And I hardly have anything left to give. But all that is left, if it takes those too, I--"

"You can't think like that. Hermione, you *can't*. I'm here, *Ron* is here. Ginny, Molly, Arthur-"

"I know." And she can see that his eyes are wet, that he might be trying to convince himself as much as her. She thinks that maybe he is better at hiding guilt, at knowing the crushing pressure within his chest. She thinks he might lose it too, and that she can't be the one to push him there.

His hands close around her arms and he shakes her a little, squeezes too hard. "We're going to be alright. It's the three of us now. We're going to make it out of this war, I prom--"

"Don't." She closes her eyes, because she can't even stomach the thought of him finishing that.

"You can't do this. *Death Eaters* did this to them. *They* killed Seamus and Justin. It wasn't us, it wasn't their choices, it was our *enemies*. You can't forget that. You *know* that. You're so smart, Hermione, and--"

"Okay." But it really meant *shut up, shut up*.

His fingers release, tighten. "We have to hold on to what we have. We have to. Alright?"

She meets his eyes again, pressing her palm hard into her chest, and Harry stares back so intensely that she drops her eyes again. "Okay."

"Alright. Good. You'll see," he mutters, taking her arm to start tugging her down the hallway again. "I'll show you. Ron is still knocked out. They don't think he'll wake until tomorrow. They're healing him up, giving him nutrients. Come on."

She thinks she has cried enough, that her overwhelming sense of grief should have been so large inside of her that it buffered the edges of her need to express it. She feels numb in a lot of ways, but here now, it is not the sadness that makes her cry. Ron's hand is hard and warm enclosed in hers, his face almost serene, his pulse steady. She hadn't admitted to it, but she had feared the worst for a long time. But Ron is alive, so beautifully alive, and Harry's arm is wrapped around her shoulders, his chin at the top of her head, and his pulse beating hard against her temple.

Somehow, it didn't make sense at all. Somehow, the three of them had made it.

Day: 1467; Hour: 18

She passes Draco on the staircase. He doesn't even pause.

Day: 1468; Hour: 15

Three boxes and a trunk. She kneels on the floor, staring up at them as if she has collapsed upon the alter. Forgiveness, sanctuary, or salvation - she doesn't know what she is praying for. An entire life, more than two decades of it, and all his earthly possessions fit into just *three boxes*.

It doesn't seem fair, or right. There should be an island for what he left behind. The entire world should have stopped and recognized what they lost. This had been a life, a human soul, a good man. This had been Justin. How is it possible that all the space he takes up in this world is three boxes? That his entire life could be so stripped down? How did he not just take up the sky?

It feels cruel. It feels as cruel as it did when she had walked into Neville's room, and found the religious book on the dresser. The ribbon had marked his last spot at a chapter titled The Judgment Seat, and she had felt it then. Her anger at God, at the world, at herself, at everything.

Three boxes.

Day: 1469; Hour: 14

She buries herself inside the darkness of a room for two days. Her grief and guilt is so overpowering, she fears she will never come back from it.

Day: 1469; Hour: 17

They bury Seamus in Ireland, under a bright sun, within the rolls of green hills. Harry is a steady force against her side, filled with his own guilt, and she and Dean stare at one another over the coffin. Seamus' family sway in their sorrow, and the cries only get louder when the bagpipes begin a mournful song. Hermione stares at Seamus' mum, willing her to look up, and at her. To blame her, to yell, to hate her.

The Order and the Ministry never told the families exactly how a person died. They never told them the situation, the mission. Hermione had told the woman anyway, with a whisper across her ashen cheek. '*Seamus is a hero. He died saving my life*', and she had had waited for the blows, the hatred, but there had been something worse. An embrace, her body held tightly to the older woman's, and sobbing in her ear. Hermione had nearly exploded under the collision of her guilt, sadness, and regret.

She speaks to him inside her head. She tries to tell him how thankful she is, but words are useless. She had always known the power of words in her life. The ones that she gained her knowledge from, ones that could make her laugh, cry, build her up and tear her apart. Words were powerful things. But there is not a word, not a string of them, not books of them, that could convey her deepest gratitude, her fiercest debt, her heavy sorrow, or her echoing regret.

Day: 1469; Hour: 23

"I don't think you ever stop wishing for a different moment."

"What?" Harry is smiling, she can tell by his voice, but when she glances over it is gone.

"Whenever anyone dies, I always think about the last moment I saw them. I think of that first. Every time, it's not good enough. I think…I should have said 'I love you', 'thank you', I should have told them how much I cared. I should have laughed more with them, and hugged them."

"It's not like we could have known… I mean…" Harry trails off and shrugs his shoulders.

"I know that. Most times we don't know that the last time is goodbye. So when it is, every time I think about how I'm going to stop getting caught up in all these stupid things that don't matter. How I'm going to enjoy my life and the people I love…but I forget. Out of all the things I remember, I hate how I forget that most of all."

He taps his fingers on the wall, and she looks away from the picture of a Gryffindor celebration at the noise. "It's too morbid to actively think that every time we see someone it might be the last time. I don't think we could survive the mentality of that."

"I don't know which one is worse, Harry. I--"

"The last time we see anyone isn't ever going to be good enough. No matter what happened, it doesn't change the fact that they died after that. It's never good enough, Hermione."

"Yes, but… I just wish it was different." Hermione pauses, pinching her nose at the physical reaction to her thoughts. "I keep seeing them. I keep seeing Justin staring up at me from the ground, looking just as scared then as when he told me he was going to be a father. Now he'll never have a chance to know how amazing he--"

"Hermione--"

"Neville, with those stupid pants on and--"

"Hey--"

"Seamus. Every time I close my eyes, I see Seamus. He died…*in my arms*, and *for my life*. People have risked their lives for me, have killed for me, but Seamus didn't die for what we were fighting for…he died *for me*, Harry! For *me*. And I…" Hermione swallows, chokes back, squeezes her lips together and waves her hand as if to ward off the things that make her unable to speak. "I have never, *ever* felt so guilty in all my life. I fought with him, I betrayed him, I didn't pretend to understand. I didn't hug him, I didn't thank him for coming back, I--"

"Hermione, please, you can't--"

"I did *nothing*. I didn't even give him forgiveness. What kind of person does that

make me, Harry? What kind of person have I become, that--"

"Oh, Hermione, come on. Don't do this--"

"It's war, and I should have known better. I should have told him that he was a friend, that I cared about him, and not make him feel...feel... He gave his life for mine. Why would he do such a stupid thing? And I love life, and I've fought hard for my life, but every day I wish he hadn't. I really, really wish--"

"Shut up," Harry whispers, shakes his head, and pulls her against him. She fights his grip but he just holds her tighter, and he's speaking against her hair but she doesn't hear a word.

He's shaking too, because he gets it. Because Harry Potter knows what it's like for people to die to save his life. Because he was the one who asked them to go, because people forfeited their survival for him to kill Voldemort. Because maybe he sees Fred taking the death meant for Harry every time he holds Ginny through her grief. Every time he looks at a Weasley, or sits across from the empty spot at their dining table, and he remembers.

Because Harry knows that immeasurable guilt just as deep, painful, and consuming as she does now. There is no place they can put it and trap it away. It does not fit into some vault marked 'War' within their minds. It is in their bones, it is a heaviness to their breath, it is a coating along their veins.

Day: 1471; Hour: 11

"It was so gross, you have no idea." Lavender pulls a disgusted face, Hermione pulls her lips back from her teeth at the imagined pain, and Harold stops grinning. "You know, in the Muggle world, you donate blood... I always thought that was a little weird, giving up something so personal of yours, you know?"

"Well, it's to help people who--"

"I know that," Lavender rushed, waving her only hand. "But I think if it wasn't for the pain and the situation... I mean, you have no idea what it was like to leave my arm on the ground. To see this part of my body, that I've had and know, and just leave it laying there like a shoe, or something."

"She kept it."

"What?" Hermione thinks she might look more disgusted than Lavender had.

"Well, one day I'll die…of old age," Lavender reaches for the bedside table to knock on it, "and I want to be buried with my arm. It's preserved in my own locker here."

Hermione blinks at her until she realizes she's supposed to talk now. "Well, that's…great, Lav."

"It's a little weird, I know, but it's mine. I'm not going to come and visit it or anything." Lavender laughs, and Hermione can't help but join her.

"It was very brave, what you did."

Lavender shrugs, her eyes dropping toward the sheets. "I know people think a lot of things about me. But I would rather lose my arm than lose my friends."

"I don't think anyone will ever doubt that now." Harold grins and brushes a thumb across her temple before heading toward the loo.

"Why…" Hermione starts, examining the hospital sheet before running a hand over it. "Why were you guys hiding under the porch?"

"We were waiting for you guys to get to the door. It was the only bit of protection we had while we waited. We were able to take out Death Eaters as they came out - surprised them, then we came out and took care of who was left. There were only three of us. If we stayed out in--"

"The open, you would…"

"Yeah." Silence reigns and Hermione stops searching for something to say at the nervous pull of Lavender's fingers on her hand. "Hey, 'Mione… I know it's kind of ugly, this whole…circus, one arm thing--"

"What? Lavender--"

"No, it's… Well, Harold will lie, because he loves me. But… Do I… Am I pretty? I mean--"

"Lav," Hermione huffs a laugh and pushes the other woman in the knee. "You're beautiful."

Hermione keeps smiling, despite the tears brimming in Lavender's eyes, because she's pretty sure she needs to. "Really? I'm not a sideshow?"

"No! Your hair can get there sometimes, but--" Hermione's grasping, reaching, hoping she'll take it.

"Mine?" Lavender begins laughing hysterically, and Hermione grins, happy to be the joke, if only this time.

Day: 1472; Hour: 8

Lupin closes the folder, thick with simple parchments that outlined the hardest years of her life. "You don't give me much of a choice."

"I know."

"We can't afford to suspend you now. You're in good health, you…usually know what you're doing. Don't ask me what the hell you were thinking this time. All of you would have been dead. Some of you would have been *lucky* to get it early. You would have been forced to give up information, and you would have given the location of safe houses, plans-"

"I know, and--"

"You obviously don't, or care much for the lives of our people and the chances of our side to--"

"Are you kidding me? Lup--"

"You put *everything* at risk! The amount of intelligence all of you held, do you have any idea the damage you would have inflicted? It wasn't bravery to go marching in there for Ron, it was stupidity! We could have lost *everything*!"

Hermione breathes out quickly, gaping at the red face across from her. She hadn't thought of it at all. She had only thought about her life and the lives of her friends going in. She had only thought she was protecting the others by not calling them in.

"You then put us in a situation where we had to go in to save the lives of those who seemed to value ours so little. We had no plan, a flimsy map, and no--"

"Lupin, I am sorry, but I value--"

"Apologies don't work with this, Hermione. You screwed up. Yes, we retrieved Ron and other prisoners. Yes, we received information. But people died that might have survived, and things could have gone so easily in a different direction. This could

have been more disastrous than you can imagine. You better thank Merlin for Draco Malfoy, or all of you would have been dead, and we could have lost any advantage to winning this war."

Hermione turns her shamed face toward the ground, her face red with anger at herself. At times she forgets the severity of consequences beyond immediate death. She forgets that she is not trapped inside a bubble of war, but that the war is everything. She has never really contemplated the idea that all of them are much more than soldiers, but can *change* things, for good or worse. It is easy to get stuck in the routine of missions and battles, to feel like just a small piece of the ultimate picture.

She had been thinking about Ron, and of the friends who went with her. She isn't sure if she has ever felt as selfish as she does now. "I can't promise it won't ever happen again. But if it does, you can take my wand for life, because it will have to mean that much to me. I'm sorry, Lupin - we did what we thought was the only thing we could."

He stares at her for a long moment, and she hopes he gets it. Hopes he understands just how much he dug into her. "Upon notification, you will be suspended from any Order duties, and will be put on magical probation for six months. Meaning that you will not be able to use any magic, whatsoever, unless you're in a life threatening situation. Until then, every team you go on a mission with will be ordered to report any rules or codes you break. If you even attempt to do something like this again--"

"I won't."

Lupin exhales heavily from his nostrils, and slides her folder off the desk. "Then report to D-nine."

She closes the door to Lupin's head in his hand.

Day: 1472; Hour: 17

He doesn't look at her once, though she never takes her eyes off of him. After everything, she needed this to be easy, but she knows he won't give it to her. He looks relaxed, leaning back in the chair with his legs sprawled out, but she can see the stiffness in the line of his shoulders. She doesn't know if it's because of her, the mission, or anything at all.

There's a glass of liquor next to his notebook on the table, a single sip left at the

bottom. There was a bottle on the end table that was half-empty, the label ripped from it and the top uncapped. She isn't sure how much of it he has drank tonight, but judging by the red across his cheekbones, it is probably the exact wrong or the exact right time to talk to him.

Hermione waits impatiently while he answers questions about the mission, the room clearing of those more seasoned - the ones who came in, got the job done, and left. The new ones - the ones who didn't understand, the ones who were scared - took the longest to leave. She isn't even sure if he's fully aware that she's there until the last person disappears down the hall and his gaze automatically swings to her. His face is a statue; beautiful, yet blank.

"You're angry."

"Are you trying to decide my moods for me?" She almost didn't expect him to speak. "I assure you, I'm--"

"Draco."

She didn't mean to sound so desperate, but it makes him pause. She just needed this to be simple, just this once. For it to make sense in a way that wasn't so complicated. He studies her for a moment, and she watches his tongue edge his teeth and press into his cheek.

"I'm surprised you're not upset."

That he told, he means. At least she hopes that's what he means. "I... Should I be?"

He smirks, shrugs a shoulder. "I would have been."

"Surprise, surprise," she mutters.

"What?"

"Maybe I should thank you." He glares because he knows it's not what she said.

"Is it necessary?"

"Yes. Thank you. You saved our lives."

"Well, I'm sure Potter will just ride back in and send you on another suicide mission. He seems to like those where you're concerned."

Hermione blinks at him and shakes her head. "What?"

"If it weren't for the fact that they could have gotten information from all of you, and that when you failed they would have left and we would have lost our chance…going to assist would have been pointless."

It stings, no matter how much she doesn't want it to. "Draco--"

"I've seen you fight for your life. But the moment Potter shows up and tells you there are things worth sacrificing it for, you have so little regard. You knew you didn't stand a fucking chance, so what was it? Dying next to Harry in some heroic battle, was it all too fitting for you? Was it some beautiful moment in your head? Was it better than you thought it could be? You in a hallway, Potter under a porch, Weasley in a cell. So far ap--"

"Shut up. You have no idea what you're on about. I--" Hermione jabs her finger into the air and he's on his feet now.

"Did it make up for the Graveyard? Was it the fact that he finally needed you? That--"

She cuts him off when she throws a pillow at his head, but it's not damaging enough to feel fulfilling. "Screw you, Draco Malfoy! I was trying to save Ron! I would have done the same for any of my friends! I would have done it even if Harry wasn't there to ask! It has nothing to do with that, and don't try to blame him. This was my choice, and I wouldn't take it back for a second! We have Ron, and--"

"And you wouldn't have shit if it hadn't been for--"

"I said thank you!"

"I don't want your-"

"What do you want? Huh, Draco? What do you *want* from me? I made the best choice I could--"

"To die?"

"To save Ron! I would have asked you to come, but I didn't want to force you into being a part of the situation at all. You have to know that. I--"

"Why?"

"Because there would have been a lot of repercussions for you. Ev--"

"Why do I have to know that," he states, the question already asked.

She is silent for awhile, both of them staring. Was he asking her to confess something? To state where she was at in this? Or was he trying to make her feel uncomfortable or odd for feeling like she owed it to him to explain, because he might be worth an explanation to her? She is so sick of the guessing game.

"I don't know," because it can be his turn to guess. "Why didn't you stop me? If--"

"What?" He sounds as if she had just told him he was on fire.

"You knew--" She stops when his face turns into a livid storm of rage.

He grabs her by the shirt and steps forward at the same time, her body hitting him like a wall. He bends his face toward her, the vein swelling up against his temple, his face red and his eyes like razors. "Don't you dare imply for a *second* that you gave me a choice in the matter. That choice was all yours, and I did the only thing I could. All you did was demand I watch you walk away. To let you die."

"I didn't--"

"You did," he hisses. "You looked like a child, wandless, standing in front of Voldemort when you left. And you just expected me to, to-- You *made* me-- And now you *blame* me?"

She winces as he yells the last part, his hand flying away from her like she brought disease. "I don't blame you! I'm sorry I... I said *thank you*! It's not what I meant! I didn't mean you should have stopped me, I know I didn't give you a choice. I meant... If you were going to go to... Why did you go to Lupin? Why did you get back--"

"Why the fuck do you think?" he yells, and flings his arms out. His knuckles hit the lamp and it falls, but doesn't shatter. It's as if the space between his arms gives her all the answers she needs, but it's just blank and empty, and she doesn't understand.

She exhales, clenches her jaw and shakes her head. Everything is falling apart. "This is too hard."

She can just see the confusion ghost across his face before she's walking away.

Day: 1473; Hour: 12

The sky opens with a scream. There may have been a moment between the downpour and the furious crack of shaking thunder, but she doesn't notice it. It feels as if the house moves from the impact of the noise, and there's a strain in her neck from snapping it toward the window.

It is the only roll of thunder that comes through the storm. She watches the rain for an hour, and everything else is still.

Day: 1473; Hour: 15

The sky is just blue, nearly white against black bark and shades of green. There's a bird feeder, oddly, hanging by wires from a branch, empty save the clumps in the column that moisture had formed. Birds are fickle on the branches, and the raindrops from the storm hours ago slowly drip down from the top of the massive trees. They set the leaves flickering, and noises she shouldn't be so afraid of sound off around her as the water hits various things.

She always loves to listen to the rain through open windows, and to watch the world rage inside the storm. It is different now, near dusk, with mud caked up her legs and her body shaking, soaked from the heavy storm and now dealing with the cold wind. She listens to the sounds around her, trying to adjust to what is nature so she will know well enough when it isn't. The last thing she needs is to waste her time firing off at raindrops.

She spots a bird through the foliage, flying far against the white-blue. In the distance there is fog that layers the hill the woods sit upon, and it creeps closer as they hustle forward. They sound like an approaching storm: the shuffle of fabric, the rustling of leaves, the smack and squelches of feet meeting mud, the snaps of twigs, the creek of moving branches, the rushes of oxygen to the lungs. The sounds become synchronized, playing like some ancient rhythm against a growing flood, building with the burn in her thighs.

Dean runs at her side, and every time she looks at him she sees the scar from her shoddy healing. In time she'll get used to it, but now it only makes her think of Seamus, of Dean bringing her back from the edge, and the two of them in a hallway with no hope. She wants to hug him fiercely every time she sees him. *Do you remember when we were absolutely sure we would die together, when we were alone and there was nothing else to hold on to? Do you remember?* Though she knows that he won't ever forget, and that she won't either. She had been in a lot of dangerous situations, and had been close to death herself. Seconds from it, even. A

centimeter.

But there was something different about that day. She had said goodbye to him and to life that minute in the hallway, and it came close to being the last thing she ever lived. That was something that would draw her toward him for the rest of her life, even if they became strangers one day. It was something that would make her feel the need to hug him each time she saw him, and smile, and say *we are alive, you know.*

The end of the forest is sudden, and she has to grab a tree to keep herself from running right over the edge of the hill. The tree is young, her fingers nearly meeting her thumb around it, and the wood splinters just as her feet stop sliding in the mud. Her momentum sprayed mud up her clothes but she doesn't notice, jerking her hand away from the tree as an Auror grabs it and it finally snaps. He skids over the side, his back meeting the sharp incline of the hill with a grunt. There are three other team members standing at the bottom, mud-caked and confused.

"When the hell did we cross into the Muggle world?" Dean is panting for breath with the rest of them, his hand coming up to rest on her shoulder as he peers over the hill. As if she could hold them both up if he slipped or something.

Hermione glances at Draco who is too busy yanking the map out of his pocket to answer any questions. There is a chorus of obnoxious honking below them, and she looks down to see a car swerving in a puddle. The four that had fallen down are trying to climb back up, but the hill was too steep and the mud too slick. There is a highway in front of them, and a primary school on the other side. The highway disappears into woods on her left, and a market is at the bottom of the hill on her right. Further along she can just make out the sign of a restaurant. There is no house or building, no ominous structure tucked away in the woods.

She slides her wand back into the holster under her arm. She used to wear it at her hip until an empty day in a safe house had her trying on Draco's and she realized she was quicker that way. It only took her one time of freaking out and thinking she lost her wand, Lavender laughing hysterically at her, before she got used to the new placement. She can't wait for the day when she'll never again have to stand at one end of a hallway and see how fast she can pull her wand and blow a pot off an end table on the other side. When this was over she wasn't going to wear a holster again. Some days she would leave her wand at home - just because she could.

She was going to have to go without magic anyway, for six months at least. Harry, Dean, Angelina and Ginny would have to for three. Lavender had gotten six months, it being their second infraction together. They wouldn't but them on probation until

after the war, but it will be a long time before any of them leave the house without their wand anyway. Hermione thought she might stay with her parents then, but it felt like hiding still, even if the war would be over. She doesn't know anything beyond tonight. Maybe, after the war, she would just stop caring. Maybe whatever happened she would let happen.

"Who the fuck drew this map?" Draco snaps, and the paper doesn't stand a chance as he crunches it into a ball in his fist.

"Pee and pee," a young girl mutters somewhere behind her, timid from Draco's tone and her first mission as a Phoenix. Hermione can't remember whose daughter she is, or even her name.

"Bloody fucking fantastic," he snarls in reply, throwing the ball of a map to his feet. Hermione gives him a look for littering but doesn't say anything, because she's been down that road too many times.

This is the first time Draco conceded in letting P&P help in any mission he ran. They were started up a year ago for Aurors who weren't capable of fighting because of injuries, as well as people who found they weren't capable of participating in any battles. Cho Chang works there now, after losing her fingers. Planning and Preparation drew up maps for the locations, gave lists of available soldiers for the mission leaders, and came up with plans for every mission, among other things. The final say was always up to the mission leader, who could use nothing or everything P&P supplied.

She doesn't think Draco will be using them again.

"There's bound to be a GPS system in one of those cars down there. We can figure out where we are, map the coordinates to the ones where we're supposed to be." Dean looks at Draco, who obviously doesn't know what the other man is talking about and looks to be deciding if he wants to admit it or not.

"You're talking about breaking into a car?" Hermione can't help the slightly scandalized tone of her voice, or the purse of her lips as she raises her eyebrows at him.

"Do you have a better idea?"

Magic was something they couldn't use in case the location was close and the Death Eaters were monitoring. The fact that it was the Muggle world meant that nothing was hidden as Grimmauld was, because the Death Eaters wouldn't risk

using magic, let alone just to enter a house. Time is something they never have enough of, and if the place wasn't already abandoned, it was bound to be soon enough. Running back to the Apparition point, making a new map, and then getting to the new location would take hours they didn't have.

"It's illegal--"

"For fuck sake Granger, now isn't the time to be the model of morality. Yo--"

"*But*," she cuts Draco off with a scathing look, "as long as we don't hurt anyone, it's the best we have got."

"Do you know how to work a GPS?" Dean asks, drawing her attention away from Draco as he grabs her elbow, leading her to the edge of the hill.

"I'll figure it out."

"I was hoping you would say that." She can hear the grin in his voice as she tentatively searches for some decent holding under her foot. *I don't blame you*, she tries to think it says. *I don't blame you*.

She finds some purchase on a rock, but the second after she brings her other foot down it gives way. She lets out a squeak, her elbow banging off something hard as she falls on her side, her weight and gravity dragging her down the hill. She flips onto her back, mud spraying up where her heels dig into the ground, and weeds sting her fingers as she grasps for something to stop the momentum. Her feet hit the ground below with a jolt and she buckles, falling forward on her knees. She can hear the curses, yelps, and drags of bodies above her and she knows Draco, Dean, and the girl met the same fate.

The four team members stare at her as she spits mud from her mouth and looks down at herself. Besides a streak of clean from her collarbone to her knee on her right side she is either splattered or covered. Dean is the least messy when he hits the bottom, having slid down on his feet and a hand, but he's clenching grass that is more red than green.

"There's a market..." Hermione trails off as Draco and the girl start trudging in that direction. Draco seems unaffected by the mud bath he just took until he begins to walk, and she can tell by the squelching that a layer of mud got into his boots.

One of the Aurors glares at the cars as they whiz past, spraying water up. Hermione takes a puddle to the face and her shaking doubles in the cold. She

imagines they look like quite a group, eight people in cloaks and covered in mud marching along the highway at twilight. Draco walks with a purpose, as if the person who drew the map is waiting in the parking lot. Hermione has to stop herself from fidgeting with nerves.

She isn't sure if people are going to get too curious about the strange group of people on the highway, all of them wearing colored bands around their arms and their faces set in grim lines. They look like a cult, and when they started looking into car windows people were going to get anxious. They stuck out like a stain on a white carpet, and she would like to remind them that Muggles carried the Killing Curse and Cruciatus in metal bullets.

The mud is drying on the side of her face, making her skin itchy, and her tone is irritated when she speaks. "Does anyone know how to break into a car without using magic?"

Dean falters in his step, the girl continues flailing her arms to try and get the mud to come off, and the other team members glance at her with no idea what she's talking about. The girl looks up at her, cold, confused, and scared. "They keep them locked?"

"Trust me, we're not the first ones who ever thought about breaking into a car." Dean grins at her, but it fades as her eyes stay locked on his scar.

"I'm going to ask," Hermione cuts in, before Dean or the girl feel more awkward or Draco's head blows off his neck.

"What?" Draco asks this in a way that would have most people pretending they didn't say anything, let alone repeating it.

"I'm going to ask," because she's not afraid of him, not usually.

"And how could you possibly think that's the smart thing to do?"

"Some people are nice people," she says this very slowly, and watches his shoulders pull tighter and his fists clench.

"You're going to walk in there like that, and someone is going to let you into their automobile to find the location to some random coordinates?" Draco sounds incredulous, and two Aurors snort. She glares at all of them.

"Watch me."

"Bullshit I will. If no one agrees, which they won't, we'll be screwed on getting to the GBS--"

"GPS."

"I don't give a shit. We're--"

"Draco, no one knows how to break into a car without magic. There are car alarms to consider if we so much as lean against it, and--"

"There--"

"There's a restaurant up the road more. If no one will help me, we'll go there and try...it your way." She was going to ramble on about how much his plan sucked compared to hers, but changed her mind. There is pride to consider, he's already angry, and it would set him off if it was just the two of them let alone the rest of the team that *he* is leading.

He squelched his way into the parking lot, stopped for a breath, and then turns to face her. He's eying her critically, and raises an eyebrow when she raises her nose into the air. "Go, Granger."

He's giving her an appeasing look, and there is an air of cockiness to the tilt of his head, as if he is sure she will fail. Like he was about to let life teach her a big lesson since she refused to learn it from him. Dean gives her a smile and the rest of the team stares at her like this entire failed plan has been her fault.

She takes her cloak off and Draco is reaching for it before she even holds it out to him. He stares at the fabric for a moment and then raises his eyes to hers to give her a look, taking it with his other hand. She's confused for three seconds until she sees the piece of paper in his hand when he waves it, and his fingers are ice cold as she takes it. She begins to turn but stops with a jerk, looking over her shoulder as the blond removes his finger from under her holster. She takes it off and hands it to him with a blush. "Go...over there. The side of the building."

She marches up to the doors of the building, shaking harder when the doors open and blast her with cold air. She's careful not to blotch the numbers out with the dirt on her fingers, holding the scrap of paper at the very corner. The cashier at the ten-items-or-less desk blinks slowly at her, and tries not to look like she's staring.

"Hey there." Hermione smiles at her. Hey there? *Hey there?* When in her life has she ever said *hey there*?

"Hullo," the other woman greets, and stretches her lips into something like a smile.

Hermione takes a deep breath, trying not to let her big brain rule her nerves. She was always under the impression that people could see right through her when she lied. She sneaked out of her window when she was ten to meet up with her friends at a cemetery, like in a movie they had watched. The next morning her father asked her how she slept, and he smiled when she said "fine". Before he had even fully turned around to flip the eggs she had convinced herself that the *way* in which he turned meant he knew everything, and she blabbed it all until she was red in the face.

"I have a serious problem." By the way the other woman suddenly looked nervous, this wasn't the best way to start. "I've been on this sort of...search and find thing. See, my boyfriend Dra-- Kuh, Henry...Drake Henry, thought it would be this really romantic thing to send me around to all these different places and find clues to find him. And it is this really romantic thing, don't get me wrong, Henry is very romantic. It started out all sweet..." Hermione pauses, her face flaming despite her coldness.

She's rambling now. She's a rambling, muddy mess of a mad person, and this woman is probably three seconds away from calling the police. Hermione watches her fingers pull under and into a fist against the counter, like she is getting ready to attack her or something. Hermione couldn't deal with Draco's face if this went wrong. She might have to smack him upside the head if only to get rid of the smugness.

"That is sweet."

Hermione raises her eyes to find the cashier's smile more genuine than nervous, and releases a heavy breath. "Yes, yes, very sweet. See his last clue were these coordinates, and I thought I had the right place but then, all of a sudden, I fell down a hill. Over there," she makes a vague gesture over her shoulder. "So...not there than."

"Down a hill?"

"Yup!" Hermione says this far too excitedly. The woman pauses, confusion flitting across her face. "But I'm still *very* excited to see him, and I was wondering...is there any way that you could look up these coordinates for me? I just need a--"

"Oh. I don't know."

"It would only take a minute really. Or just ask if anyone in the sto--"

"I'm not supposed to log onto the internet if it's not for store purposes." The cashier purses her lips and moves over to the front of the computer screen. Hermione blinks at her for a moment, because she can't honestly remember the last time she heard something like 'internet'. She suddenly wonders how many emails she's gotten, and a strange, crazy sort of laugh bubbles up in her throat.

"I would really appreciate it if you made this one exception."

Because it was pretty important. Because there is a war raging, and Hermione is a soldier with scars, and memories, and friends who have died. There were these people, these horrible people called Death Eaters, who were in this safe-looking town. The town where you didn't lock your doors at night, where little kids played outside until well after dark, where people lived and breathed and didn't know. Not until someone in a hood and mask comes and kills you, without feeling, while you were bent over produce and trying to pick out the best oranges. Not until your children are orphans who don't play outside anymore, when even a locked door can't protect you, and people can bring your world to its knees with a *flish* and *flick* of a stick.

Hermione feels a burst of anger, raw in her gut. All the cost of war, and all that it took from her, and this stupid woman with her sour face who wouldn't even get onto the internet for the sake of it. Hermione would like to shove her inside her memories, to show her every moment that hurt too much to think about, and every smiling face that she would never see outside of them again. *Do you see*, she will ask, and scream, and maybe she will cry. *Do you see?*

"I'll go ask my boss."

Thirty-Two

Day: 1473; Hour: 17

Hermione scans the store quickly as soon as the woman's back is turned, finding nothing but the trail of water and dirt her boots had made. The sign on the door and the clock on the wall tell her it's ten minutes until closing, and she can't even hear the wheels of a cart over the elevator music playing through the speakers. Hermione ducks under the counter before the cashier's back is even out of sight, staring at the computer for two seconds like she's never seen one before.

Her fingers feel stiff and awkward on the keys, and then she hits panic, opening the internet and trying to remember. The piece of paper Draco gave her is shaking between her fingers as she punches in the numbers and hits Enter. Her eyes track across the map quickly, counting twice before she closes the website.

"Shit," she whispers, grabbing a small stuffed animal from the box on the counter and using it to wipe up her mess on the floor. She slides back out to the other side of the counter, the eye of the little monkey scraping against the floor as she wipes at one more streak.

She stands up, fully expecting the woman to be back and staring at her, but she still doesn't see her. Hermione shoves the monkey deep into the box, catching an elephant before it hit the floor. The tiles were still dirtier than they were, but at least there were no puddles. She's about to turn and jet out of the store until she sees a red string, a savings card, a name tag, keychains, and a set of keys.

The directions she had gotten from the website said that P&P had been off by about ten kilometers. They would have to continue East for that long before hitting a left, and it wasn't going to be an easy task. They would no doubt be running along a Muggle highway, in the dark, like a bunch of crazy people. Her legs hurt with just the idea of it, the skin on her thighs and ribs chapped and rubbed raw, and she wanted this mission to be over already. The longer it took them, the better the chance that there would be nothing left when they got there.

Hermione doesn't even *really* think before she's reaching forward, grabbing the key with the black box at the end, the letter H marked in white. Her fingers are numb on the metal ring, twisting it quickly, and taking two keys off to get to the one she wanted. She pockets the one to a car, her nail cracking as she hurries to slide the other two back on again. Her heart is thumping wildly and she can make out the

click of shoes over the music now.

Twist, twist, and two keychains jingle off one another. Hermione holds her breath, as if the inanimate objects will now *get* that silence is preferred. She slides it back to where she had grabbed it from, her eyes wide on the dirt-smudged brass, and lets her forehead hit her hand on the counter. On her third breath the cashier clears her throat. Hermione looks up to find her emerging from the aisle, and it takes her two tries to smile.

"I'm sorry, we can't do that. Do you have the address? I might know where it is, or you can buy a map…" The woman returns the fake smile and then drops the pretense when she spots the dirt on the counter.

"Oh. Alright, I'll just try Floo…calling one of my friends again. Thank you anyway!"

"Sure," the cashier mutters, bending to retrieve cleaner and a roll of paper towels.

Hermione has to remind herself not to run as she leaves, shoving her hand into her pocket to wrap around the car key. She turns sharply toward the side of the building when the doors close behind her, and she raises her hand, folding it and moving her thumb as if she's dialing a number. As soon as she passes the windows, she throws herself forward into a run, puddles of water slapping up into her jeans.

Seven heads snap toward her when she rounds the corner, and the young girl raises her wand. An Auror gives her a stern look and smacks her hand down. Draco's smug look isn't there, perhaps because he's gone on too many missions with her to not know when she's in a panic.

"There are seven cars here, two more in the back. None of them have a GPS. All of them were un--" Draco had obviously thought - knew - it wouldn't work, and had used her determination as a distraction for the employees.

"Was the back employee parking?" Hermione cuts off Dean, and only looks at him for the time it takes for a single nod before she's running toward the back of the store. They start running with her, and she's glad she's not on a mission with anyone who thinks she's doing it for recreational purposes.

"Granger."

"I stole her keys," and she sounds a little hysterical.

There's a Jeep and a Honda in the back parking lot, and she whips around to the driver side of the Honda, yanking on the door to see if it's locked. It opens easily, and she has to step back from the strength behind her pull. Dean is the only one who makes a move to get in the car, the other six standing dully.

"Get in! Get in the car!" Hermione yells, and slams the door shut too hard.

"There isn't enough ro--"

"Make room," Dean bites out, cramming himself into Hermione's side, his legs planted awkwardly to either side of the middle console.

Hermione starts the car as they start piling in, Draco squeezing in next to Dean, and three people sitting in the back. One of the men grunt as another sits on his lap, and the girl pulls Hermione's hair between her palm and the seat as she throws herself in. Dean jerks back so hard he hits his head off the roof when Hermione throws the car into Drive and comes a little too close to his more sensitive areas. She hits the gas too hard, and the tires squeal as she pulls out. The girl slams the door shut behind her, and Hermione's hands are shaking on the wheel.

This is just perfect. The war will end and she'll go to a Muggle jail for stealing a car. Her parents were going to freak. Hermione Granger, Car Thief. She had wanted a lot of things when she was younger - things her parents couldn't afford. And no matter how simple it would have been to shove it in her pocket, she never did, and she never regretted that she didn't. Now she made the decision to steal a *car* in all of five seconds.

She doesn't dare look out the rearview mirror when she reaches the front parking lot, because in her head it is the cashier in front of the doors, screaming, one hand with a phone dialing the police and a shotgun in the other. They hit the road with a bump, the tires squealing again as she turns sharply onto the road. Another car blasts a honk at her for a solid five seconds as they swerve to avoid hitting her. She had been busy studying for her Apparition test and preparing for war when she was old enough to drive. She learned for one month in the summer, the kind of driver where her parents had to tell her to go faster rather than slow down, and never got her license. She could drive just fine, but high speed probably isn't a very good idea.

Someone lets out a ragged breath from the backseat, and she realizes that this is the first time many of them have even been in a car. She doubted any of them had been, except Dean, but this wasn't going to be a nice, safe joyride to sway them toward respect of Muggle inventions. They are probably freaking out as badly as she is at the moment.

"Do you know where we're going?" She glances at Draco with his question, and finds him looking at her as if she was the crazy person who created automobiles, and is very disapproving of the fact.

"Yeah. She left to ask her boss so I got on the internet to find it myself. She left her keys… I just did it. Pee and Pee were a little too far to the West. We have to go straight for seventeen lefts, and we make the eighteenth. It's somewhere straight ahead after that." She gives him a look, because somewhere, at some stupid point in time, she began to need his assurance that she didn't just screw up.

"Watch where we're going, Granger."

"Yes, please," the girl whispers.

"What is this thing? A metal death trap?" the older Auror asks, his voice sharp, though she doesn't know if it's because of where he is or the girl on his lap.

"It's called a-" Hermione starts, because facts calm her down. Knowledge, theories, ideas, facts. Not so much stealing a car.

"He knows, Hermione." Dean's voice is soft, calming, and more strained from his uncomfortable position than the way she drives.

Fourteen more left turns before she could rid herself of the thing. It made her feel dirty, though it could have been the dirt all over her and the way Dean's sweaty arm was turning it back into mud. She just hopes that the police aren't on their way, or drive past them and wonder why there are eight people shoved into a car. They would have to use magic then, deal with some messy politics, and she's pretty sure it would break the thread she was hanging onto with Lupin. She couldn't even think about what he was going to say to this now. She's pretty sure she gets into more trouble now than she did at Hogwarts.

"Stop!" Dean yells the second she slams her foot onto the break. She had been contemplating driving straight through the red light in an attempt to get there quicker, but the cars zooming across put her off.

Everyone in the car lurches forward, and Dean slams the shift up into Park to avoid it crushing his bits. A stream of curses sound off around her, and Hermione breathes in deep, clutching the steering wheel tighter. "Sorry about that."

"Have you ever drove a car before, Hermione?"

"*Yes*, but I'm trying to avoid the police catching up to us, Dean."

"It would be nice if we weren't killed in the process."

"Fritz, if the police come after us--"

"I'm aware, Grudder, but I--"

Hermione tries to latch onto the names. She usually makes it a point to know everyone's names before a mission, as a matter of respect. She had gotten to the meeting too late and they had left for the mission too quickly for her to ask.

"How far is--" Draco cuts himself off when she reaches between Dean's legs to put the car back into Drive, and she glances at him a second before his eyes move from her hand to her face. "How far is the location after we go left?"

She eases her foot onto the gas, and she's pretty sure there is a sigh of relief from Dean when the car doesn't jolt forward. "I'm not sure. Maybe a five minute run?"

"Are we going to start at the turn?" It sounds like the voice of Grudder.

"We'll leave the car somewhere else. The Muggle authorities will be looking for it. Go past the turn Granger, and then we'll go back to it on foot."

She isn't sure how that will work out either, considering what they look like, but it's the best they could do. The clock on the radio shows five past the hour, meaning the store closed five minutes ago, and the woman was bound to know by now. If she hadn't before they even left the parking lot.

She can see Draco and Dean tense out of the corner of her eye, and someone inhales sharply from the backseat as she comes up on another red light. She frowns, easing into it, and shoots them a look for doubting her. Draco is still staring at her, his hand tense on the dash, and it makes her more nervous. She holds his eyes, not knowing the look there, until the light on his face turns green and she presses on the gas.

"Three more," Dean whispers reassuringly to himself, before the car erupts in yells, grunts, and curses as she slams on the breaks again.

She throws one hand up into the air, forgetting herself and slamming a palm down on the horn. "You have to stop there, you idiot!"

The man in the other car yells something out of his window, and it's loud enough for her to hear 'bitch' inside the car. Dean flips him off, Hermione accelerates, and someone grunts at the display of Muggle road rage. She can feel Draco's eyes burning into her, as if he's watching for any signs that she's about to do it again.

"I will never get into another of these things again." Fritz, she thinks.

"The Muggles can have it."

"I think that was the turn right there, that little dirt road - did you see it?"

"I doubt that a dirt road would be listed on the map," Hermione answers Dean, looking over at the teenagers in the car that rushes forward to pass them. The three stare back, one of them flicking a cigarette out the window with an incredulous look. The other two laugh, and Draco's frown grows deeper.

"I don't think they would want a house on a main road tho--" Dean starts, but Draco cuts him off in annoyance.

"Stop the car, Granger."

He is obviously on the same page as Dean, though he gives her an exasperated look when she pulls over to the side of the road instead of stopping the car right then. He seemed to have no concept of how a road works, but she doesn't bother filling him in. He's too angry and they aren't on good terms, and she doesn't need a fight right now.

She kills the engine and everyone rushes for the doors like she really drove *that* badly. Hermione closes her door and takes a step back, watching them pile out of the car. It reminds her of the Halloween before Hogwarts, when she was nine, and her cousins babysat her. She had been crammed into her aunt's van with a bunch of people she didn't know, two rolls of toilet paper clenched in her sweaty palms. She remembers the strain of voices singing loudly to the radio, a cute boy with his arm around her shoulders, autumn in her nose, and giggling madly in the dark.

Her sight is obstructed by fabric and she pushes it away from her eyes. Draco pulls his hand back from placing the hood of her cloak on her head, and the fabric is warm against her body, and smells like him. He hands her her holster, and they are sprinting across the street before she can even put it on. She swivels her hips as she runs, putting it behind her back and drawing the straps over her shoulders. She shoves her arms through the sleeves of her cloak and draws her wand as soon as her feet hit the dirt road.

She's back to soldier mode; the fact that she stole a car some distant, irrelevant memory inside her head. She has to push harder to keep in line with Draco's long strides. They run down the middle of the road in a two-four-two formation, and her and Draco will break to the left, the last two to the right, and the middle will keep straight when they spot the house. The trees are black and the sky is perhaps the most beautiful shade of purple she has ever seen. Light, and open, and if she doesn't think too hard, it's almost as if she will run and sink right into it.

Draco holds up his hand before they go around the bend in the road, and the murmuring of voices drift toward them as the rocks stop shifting under their feet. He turns and motions toward the girl and one of the Aurors, jerking his head for them to come forward. He holds out four fingers to the remaining four team members and then points them toward the woods on the right side of the road, then shakes his hand toward the noises. The four of them nod and cross the road, and Hermione takes a deep breath before following Draco's back into the woods on the left. She hates having to go through the woods, because it was always too loud, and her nerves were always shot from freaking out at every snapped twig or rolling rock.

They crept through, moving slowly to be as quiet as possible in the extreme silence around them. Laughter travels on the air somewhere in front of them, and a baby starts crying. The sound almost faltered her footsteps and she watches Draco's shoulders grow more tense. A voice of a child yells out something that causes more laughter, and Hermione knows this is going to be a lot harder in different ways than she's used to. No one wanted children in the crossfire of anything. At least, not her side.

Draco stops after several agonizing minutes and she comes up to stand at his side, looking through the leaves. She would have been doubting this being the right place if it weren't for the robes some of them were wearing. She counts three teenagers, eight almost-teenagers, three children, and one baby. A figure moves past a window on the second floor, and she looks up to Draco to find his eyes on her. She gives a nod as the Auror steps up to her other side, and the girl takes a few seconds before stepping up to Draco's. They aim their wands, casting Stunning and Binding spells, and an array of colors jet out from the other side of the woods a moment after theirs. There are screams, and a single second before something hits the tree in front of Draco and they rush away from it, the crack echoing out as it smashes onto the floor of the woods.

Ten minutes later finds them with eighteen children, because they are all really children, bound in a huddle on the front porch. The rest of the house is empty of both people and anything useful. Some of the children scream, some glare, others threaten, and most of them cry.

"They were hiding their kids?" Dean bunches his cheek and tilts his head as one of them tries to kick out his leg.

"Well, I guess there ought to be something they do like us." The girl is proud, because it's her first mission and she doesn't realize this one has been a failure. Hermione hopes it's the closest she'll come to knowing it.

"Take your fucking Mudblood hands off my brother," a boy seethes, and she can see the anger in his eyes mirrored back from behind hundreds of masks.

"I think she might take him home actually. Raise him as her own," Draco drawls, glancing at the baby Hermione was rocking in her arms before his eyes flick up to meet hers.

For a moment she thinks he might be serious until she spots the twitch of a smirk on his lips as the young boy begins thrashing against his magical binds. She stares down at the baby for a moment before reminding herself to pick up more birth control. She has only a week left. The little fingers curl into her neck and she wraps the blanket more firmly around him, glancing at the back of Draco's head and shaking her own.

"You would know all about liking Mudbloods, wouldn't you? You--" The boy jerks back with a hiss, as if the proximity of Draco's hand actually burned him. "Don't touch me you fucking blood traitor! You Mudblood infected pi--"

The back of the boy's head hits off the house as Draco shoves a hand against his chest. He pulls his hand back, leaving the Portkey there, and the boy is gone before he can manage to wiggle it off of him. Draco stands and stares at the spot too long, and Hermione wonders if he saw himself, like a ghost. He had known that sort of disgust and hatred once, had owned it even.

She reaches out her hand to maybe slide it up along his shoulder, but drops it. "Draco."

She says it too softly and his face is a mask when he turns, an eyebrow raised like whatever she was going to say next was bound to piss him off. "What?"

"What are we going to do with him?" The baby smacks his hand into her chin and when she looks down at him he laughs, drool dripping down onto her shirt. She thinks of his brother, of the indiscriminate affection of babies, and something rushes up inside of her that she can't explain. Suddenly her eyes are wet, nothing makes sense, and she just wants to take him to her parents.

She kisses his forehead on instinct, and when she raises her eyes, Draco is staring at her oddly. "Take him to the Ministry."

"The Ministry?"

"He's not a lost fucking puppy, Hermione."

"Well, I'm not saying to take him back with us." She's exasperated, and he gives her a look like he doesn't understand, but she doesn't either. "I'll take him to the Ministry."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Day: 1473; Hour: 19

"I stole a car." Hermione tells Lupin this with her eyes firmly planted on Ron's eyelids.

She had come directly after leaving the Ministry, impatient to see her friend, and disappointed to find him still asleep. Harry looks up at her confession, chewing slowly on one of the sweets he had stolen from the 'Get Well' table. Harry had come that day to find Ron in the bathroom, he had told her, and though the redhead had gone back to sleep not ten minutes after Harry's arrival, it was more than she had had with him.

"A car?" Lupin doesn't sound like she thought he might. Instead, he's just tired.

"I'll write up the report tonight, but I wanted to let you know now. The map was wrong, and we were several kilometers off from where we should have been. We were in the Muggle world, caked in mud, in our robes, on the highway. No one was hurt, the car was fine except maybe some interior damage... The Muggle authorities are sure to have my face on video, though."

Lupin lifted his eyebrows and closed his eyes, his forehead folding in wrinkles as he sighs. Again, it's not the reaction she expects. "I can't tell you that there won't be repercussions for you across the wizarding line. I'll talk to the Ministry."

"We couldn't use magic and--"

"If things had gone badly, there would be problems, Hermione. As it is, it worked

out, and you did what needed to be done. I consider it one of the less extreme choices in your list of transgressions."

Hermione blinks at him and returns her gaze to Ron. She lifts a hand, her fingertips swirling through the strands of red that are standing straight up. His mouth is open, eyes moving with his dreams, and his hand is large under hers. He had acted very oddly, Harry had told her. He had just sort of stood there in a shock, and when Harry hugged him, he had not hugged back for several seconds. He hadn't said much of anything at all, and Harry's mouth had been pulled down in worry since she walked through the door.

Ron was probably going to have to talk to someone, and someone who was not them. Neither one liked the sound of that very much, but she knows that sometimes it's what has to be done. She has no idea what Ron had went through as a prisoner, and she's almost glad at the idea that he won't tell her - she doesn't know if she could stand to know. She doesn't know if she's strong enough for his memories, and for his family grief.

But she would be here for him. No matter what it took, or how much it hurt, or if he hated it. No matter what this war had done, it was always going to be the three of them. Always, always, always.

Day: 1473; Hour: 21

Draco is sitting on the couch when she enters the house. His notebook is in his lap, unopened, as he reads through a small stack of papers. The mission reports, she's guessing. The older Auror is sitting in a recliner by the window, his white beard turned grey in the shadows. He glances away from the view out the window and to her face, giving her a short nod before taking a sip of black liquid. He had been the only one who hadn't given her a look after he got out of the car, like she had just tried to kill all of them.

She strips off her cloak, clumped and bunched with dried dirt, and lets it drop to the floor next to her trunk. She looks as if she just emerged from underground, only spots of her skin peeking through the layer of grime, and all she can smell is dirt. Harry had looked quite worried when she entered Ron's room, until his eyes had scanned and found no proof of blood.

The silence in the room is thick as she pulls the top of her trunk up, though it might just be in her head. She digs out a set of clothes, grabbing what she needs for a shower, and avoids looking at the pictures taped to the inside of the top. Sometimes she stares at them for days, and other times she cannot look at them at

all.

"I need your report, Granger." She jumps at the sound of his voice, scraping over his tongue. It sounded as if he was too tired to even speak.

"I'm aware of the post-mission procedure," she responds, and then feels bad about it. She didn't want to fight, and he sounded exhausted. "Just...after I shower, okay?"

He doesn't respond, and doesn't look at her, so she pauses and then leaves for the bathroom. Her boots feel too heavy on her feet, her legs half-dead, and she wants to sleep for a very long time. The shower is better and worse at the same time - she scrubs the crusted dirt away, renewed, but she nearly falls asleep against the wall of the shower. She has to blast it to cold to wake herself up, and she's still shaking when she leaves the bathroom.

Draco is gone from the living room but the Auror remains, his glass full again. She digs parchment and a pen from her trunk and plops down on the couch, on the cushion Draco had been, her handwriting sloppy from the tremble in her fingers. The Auror looks at her when she leaves, his eyes bloodshot and his lips in a grim line. She briefly contemplated staying because he looked like he might want her to, but she knows older people like to keep their secrets far too close to them for that. She thinks it's because they had lived too long with them to ever let go.

Draco's door is cracked less than the space she would need to fit her pinkie through. She remembers watching him disappear into this room the night before, when she had walked past it and joined the young Phoenix in another bedroom. She taps the parchment against the door instead of her fist, though she doubts he's sleeping. Not with the door cracked and the light on. She opens it before she gets a response, shifting nervously when she meets his eyes.

It is times like these when she doubts everything. She questions every move, right down to the act of closing the door, in case it might give him the idea she thought they were going to be doing something - just in case he didn't want to. He had been distant since she left with Harry to rescue Ron. There hadn't even been a look that felt all that personal, at least not out of anger, and she couldn't know what that might mean. She thinks it's a little ridiculous that after all this time she could be so unsure around him, but she doesn't know if anything will ever be solid between them.

It hardly seems fair that he's sitting there, on a bed, in only his underwear. He had to know by now how utterly distracting that was for her. It takes all of her will

power not to ogle him, and trace the lines of his chest with her eyes, or think about a lot of things she shouldn't think of this second.

"Do you think they'll give him back?" She blurts this out, not even aware she was going to ask until she did. She had been standing still too long after the door clicked shut, wondering if she *should* have let the door click shut, and his eyes hadn't wavered. She's pretty sure he does that on purpose, to watch her fidget.

"To his parents?" Draco asks, because somehow he already knew what she was talking about. The baby she had held on the porch.

"Yes."

"Probably. Unless his parents are sent to Azkaban..." He trails off with a shrug. Sometimes she thought he knew her more than he should be allowed to, but it never stopped him from saying things he knew she wouldn't like.

"I just..." she pauses, collects her thoughts, and goes to speak again when he cuts her off.

"Is that the report?" Because maybe he knew how easily the conversation could lead to his youth, or the things that exasperated him about her like how she always felt bad for things she couldn't help. Because he probably knew that she was bound to go on a rant about children, and the things you are taught and the things you learn, and relate it to some beautifully destroyed thing. Like innocence, and him maybe, too.

"Yeah."

She didn't move to give it to him and his eyes drop to his open notebook, his hand reaching up to cover his mouth. He moves it down, his mouth pulling into a frown, the bottom lip pulling away from his teeth, and then he squeezes his chin. She can hear the scrape of his scruff against his palm, and imagines it on her cheek. Some days she wakes with a red face, like a rash, from the pull of his facial hair.

"I really don't blame you, and--"

"Gran--"

"It's not what I meant when I ask--"

"Shu--"

"I'm sorry fo--"

"Stop," he barks, and glares at her.

"I'm just sorry for that whole night," she rushes out before he can interrupt her again. Most of that night. She isn't sorry for getting to Ron on time, but the rest of it was a nightmare.

He ignores her, looking down again. She isn't surprised. He is angry for the whole event, but she thinks he might be angry for what he had said yesterday. *To let you die*, and the struggle of words because he didn't know how to say it, or maybe he didn't want to. As sick as it might be, it's proof for her. That Draco did care for her, at least a little. At least enough to get angry for putting him through that. Maybe he had gotten backup because of what Lupin said, and how they had almost ruined everything.

But, sometimes, she wants to think that it was because of her. Because he couldn't let her die. Because maybe he, too, felt this devastating, cruel, and wonderful thing that she tried so hard to convince herself was something else. She remembers the look on his face when she had turned for the door, when she left for the mission, hope and goodbye hanging in silence from their ribcages. She didn't know what it meant, the look, but it had made it hurt more. It had made her heart explode.

"Alright, well..." She pushes away the awkwardness, his diverted eyes, the fact that she doesn't know what to do. "I already told Lupin about the car. I saw him earlier. You shouldn't get any problems because of it."

He's rubbing his cheek now, the scraping the only thing that fills the silence. She watches the movement, and decides she wants to shave him one day. She wonders if he will let her. She bites her lip when he doesn't respond, walking forward to hold the report out to him. He's still for a second longer and then sighs, snapping his notebook shut.

He meets her eyes when he grabs the parchment, and his face looks set. Looks the way it does after he's reached a decision that he isn't sure if he's happy about or not. When he isn't sure if it's the best plan he could do. She didn't even know there had been some sort of choice.

He tosses the notebook to the floor, followed by her report, and leans back against the wall. He's too tense to be relaxed, and she's too weak not to watch his muscles stretch with his movements and look away quickly enough for him not to

notice. "What do you want?"

"Huh?" Articulate, Hermione, good job.

"Why are you hovering?"

"I'm not hovering."

"You're hovering."

"I want to shave your face." She blushes as he pauses, his eyebrows rising. She really has to work on not blurting things out tonight when she doesn't know what else to say. Though, with her emotions, and why she was really hovering, she figures this might have been the least embarrassing and awkward of them all.

"Beg pardon?" She ignores the quirk at the corner of his lips as he asks, and sets her jaw. Brave face.

She really doesn't want to, but she repeats it, hating the amused look he gives the wall behind her. "I've just always wondered about it."

"Shaving my face?"

"Shaving *a* face."

"Why don't you just charm yourself a beard and go at it?"

"Because that's...weird." It reminds her of the whole Polyjuice incident at Hogwarts, a very traumatic experience for her, not that she would tell him. She also never *really* thought of shaving someone's face before. He did odd things to her brain.

"You seriously want to shave my face?" He gave her a contemplative look, and she marches on before he can think too much and it gets more awkward.

"Are you scared?"

"Hardly. Though letting you near my neck with a razor isn't exactly relaxing."

She laughs, and for some reason, he looks surprised. "Oh, come on, Draco. You know I wouldn't do anything on purpose."

"That makes me feel loads better. For some reason, letting you experiment with razor blades on my face sounds completely appealing."

She doesn't know what to say, knowing from the start that he wasn't going to let her, and now she is stuck trying to make a graceful exit. She notices that he's waiting for her to speak, his thumb tapping against his leg, so she rushes out the words. "I'll be gentle."

His lips twitch again, and she knows the look that changes his stoic expression for just three seconds. She knows because he likes to whisper a lot of perverted things into her skin when he's ravaging her mouth or owning her body, when he makes her want to do them all. He opens his mouth but changes his mind, surprising her when he pushes himself off the bed and walks toward his trunk. She stares when he bends over to rummage through it, and shakes her head. It just *felt* like it had been forever, and it was all her fault, really.

She had been replaying the last time they slept together in her head since the moment she left the bed that day. She felt like it had been months since she touched him, really touched him, and he just had to be difficult. Perhaps it was because she had chosen to leave rather than stay that day. Maybe it was because she had reminded him of Pansy then - because she was the only friend Draco Malfoy really had, and she had been about to jump off a cliff without thinking twice about it. Maybe he decided it was better to keep some distance now. She couldn't begin to know the things that went through his mind, and she didn't want to guess. Even implying in her own head that he felt more than a casual, almost flippant friendship toward her was dangerous and stupid. But she needed him now. She needed the way he made her *feel*, and forget, and be *okay*.

She just hated the rationalized distance, and the air of detachment he did so well with her. It made her want to shake him until he reminded her of the passion that she has seen rule him. Sometimes she knew he had to care as solid as her bones, but sometimes he made her think he never could. It was best for her to keep her own emotional distance, but he made her forget to do that a lot. She should hate him for it. She couldn't.

He doesn't look at her when he walks past her and out of the room, a can of shaving cream and a razor in his hand. She follows him down the hall and into the bathroom, and she closes the door behind them before she can even contemplate it. He doesn't seem to notice, setting the supplies on the sink and turning on the tap.

"You're looking at me like a Potions project."

She looks up at his voice, catching his eyes in the mirror, and watching as they glance down at the smile that's too shy on her face. She thinks to say something witty, but it might come out too scathing, so she ignores his comment altogether.

"I won't be able to reach you properly. You should sit on the tub." She schools her voice into an analytical tone, because he's making her too nervous, and she doesn't want to give herself a chance to feel more awkward.

She turns the water off in the sink and grabs everything off the side, noticing the aftershave for the first time. She had never been sure if it was the shaving cream or the aftershave that she smelt on his face sometimes. It was only when they were staying somewhere they couldn't use magic and he had to shave the Muggle way, but she always secretly hopes that it's there when she gets close enough to know.

Detached, detached, she thinks, clearing her throat. She's sure it's pretty bad when just thinking of his different scents puts her mind in the gutter. That really couldn't be healthy at all.

She flips the lid down on the toilet seat and reaches around him to turn on the tap, adjusting for a comfortable temperature. Her arm brushes his, and when he moves she thinks he's pulling away until his arm rubs back and forth on hers. She pulls back in curiosity to find him lathering up his face with the shaving cream.

He pauses the first time, and looks up to her on the second giggle. His eyebrow comes up as she covers her mouth, pressing her lips together. Did she honestly just *giggle*? She couldn't help it - she had always thought men looked a little funny with a full beard of shaving cream. She had discovered that in fourth year, laughing while Padma glared and deemed Hermione unworthy of looking at the sexy men in her magazine.

"Quite done?"

"I think so." Hermione grins, sitting down on the toilet, her one leg between his. The space between them was cramped at best, and his kneecap was distractingly close between her legs.

"Good. I don't really care for you laughing while approaching me with something sharp."

"Coward," she mutters, dragging the blade up his cheek.

They are both silent for at least a minute, Hermione fully concentrated on the

curves of his cheek, jaw, and upper neck. She could shave her legs in the amount of time it took her to get a quarter of his face done, but she was nervous. Something about being this close to him, and of him trusting her enough to - like he kept pointing out -- take something sharp to his face. His breath kept puffing out against her face, her hair, her ear. Every time she moved to rinse out the razor his leg would press into her thigh and her shoulder would meet his, and she would think how he was one garment away from being naked. Every stroke of the razor revealed more of his face, and she wanted to touch the skin, to feel how smooth it was beneath her fingertips. So she did, even if it is obvious that her thumb *really* doesn't have to run the length of his cheekbone to tilt his face up, she can't help herself. The experience is...she isn't sure what it is, but it makes her stomach get all screwy, and it feels really personal.

She looks up to find him watching her, his eyes a bright grey and his stare intense. Her breath catches a little in her throat and she looks at his neck quickly, as if not making eye contact meant that he wouldn't notice the strange huff of air in her throat. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth as she brings the razor over his chin, and the skin moves out when he sticks his tongue between his lip and his teeth, pushing out. She almost jumps at his fingers on her wrist, which wouldn't have been a good thing, and his fingertips slide up her hand until he's grasping the fingers she has wrapped around the razor. He moves their hands in short strokes, and she looks at the curve of his tongue before meeting his eyes again.

She doesn't really *think* about much of anything. It's like the rest of her body held a mutiny on her brain, and she just *did* it. Her hand had been sliding over his neck to his nape, her shaving cream covered fingers pushing up into his hair. His eyes looked to be tracking every movement of her face before settling back on hers again. Then it happened, just as she was about to return her concentration to his chin. Suddenly she was pulling her hand back, the razor was dropping somewhere over her shoulder, and she *launched* herself at him. Later, in her head, it will be like when the cheetah finally launches itself out of the grass and onto its prey. She'll also chastise herself for being dramatic, and realize it was a lot more of simply *falling* into him.

She can't see his face, her eyes closed and her lips against his, but she can feel his hand grab her arm and the other flail at her hip for something steady to hold onto. It's no use, and they fall halfway into the tub, his head cracking off the side.

"*Fuck*!" he yells against her mouth.

Hermione opens her eyes wide, her face flaming with her embarrassment. His hand leaves her arm for his head, and she really has no idea why she basically just

attacked him. She pulls up, about to apologize, when he drops his hand from his head to the tub. It smacks into the water pounding out of the tap, and he lifts himself up, his other hand wrapping around the back of her head to pull her down again. His mouth meets hers, their teeth clinking together, and shaving cream rubbing off his face and onto hers. She's too flustered to even notice, gripping tighter to the back of his neck and clenching onto his shoulder.

Her stomach flutters, and goosebumps spread across her shoulders and down her arms. Her heart hops, and skips, and does a wild dance inside her chest. She had missed this, so much. To be wrapped around him, to feel him, to get lost within him. She wants to melt herself into his skin, and breathe him.

His tongue rushes past her lips, running over the ridges at the roof of her mouth before sliding against her own. There's a faint taste of the shaving cream, and it grows stronger when she enters his mouth. She draws back on instinct from the strange taste, and he turns his head, spitting into the tub before turning back toward her. She's kissing him the moment he does, and the taste is still there, but she doesn't care.

He wraps an arm around her waist, squeezing her to him in squelches of wet cloth, and she's distantly aware that he's pushing them up and back. She puts out a hand blindly, trying to find something to grab and help pull her along, but the only thing she can cling to is him. She pulls her legs up until her knees are against the edge of the tub, using them to push herself forward as he slides up so his back is against the side and not the bottom. It really has to be one of those most awkwardly positioned snogs she's ever taken part in until his hands grab her bum and slide her over the edge, her knees hitting the tub to either side of his lap. The bottom of her legs are still strange and cramped against the other side of the tub, and judging by their angle, his legs are still resting on the ledge.

She thinks maybe they should move, but then she rocks forward into the hardness in his lap; they both moan, he sucks her tongue, and she can't imagine a better place. He squeezes her bum again, pulling her forward and jerking his hips. Hermione rushes out a breath into his mouth as he groans, grabbing her hips and grinding her against him. He bites her lip, and her hands are slick against his skin from the water and shaving cream. She rubs her palms against his nipples and he kisses her harder, exhaling heavily from his nose. Licking his teeth, she twirls her tongue around his before snapping her neck back, needing oxygen.

Hermione stares at the ceiling, panting wildly as he yanks her shirt up, wet from him. He gives a chaste kiss to her neck as her bra follows, and then his mouth is around her nipple. She lets out a shaky breath, and can't help the whimper when he

bites down, bordering on the edge of too hard. She clutches his head to her, pulls his hair, and then presses him tighter again. He laughs, the air vibrating against her nipple before he pulls back.

He leans his head against the wall, moving a hand to each of her breasts, his lips swollen. She raises an eyebrow at his satisfied look and leans forward, tracing his smirk with her tongue until it disappears and he kisses her. He pulls back for a moment, his mouth moving over a breath, and then changes his mind on whatever he was going to say. His face changes for a moment, like he isn't sure about something, before he leans forward to kiss her. His fingers drift down to her sides, barely skimming her skin, and it's too tentative compared to their earlier actions. She kisses him harder because of it, and his fingers clench, unclench, clench, and then grip hard into her hips. As if he couldn't help it. She would like to tell him that if they could help it, none of this would have started in the first place.

She stands in jerks, her legs tingling and numb, and he stares up at her, eyes hooded, as she pulls her pants and knickers off. She nearly falls over, the cloth sticking to her legs in the small space, and he laughs. A low, husky laugh that makes her want to do a lot of things that she wouldn't say out loud.

He's so hard against the confines of his shorts that it looks painful, and she doesn't know if he's wincing from that or cramps in his legs when he pulls them off the rim of the tub. His fingertips are gentle on the red, raw skin of her thighs where her wet jeans had chaffed while she was running earlier. It takes him a few attempts to stand, his fingers wrapping around to the back of her legs and traveling up to her hips as he gets to his feet. She grabs his face and kisses him, and he returns it hotly, reaching down to her thighs to pull her up and against him. The weight unbalances him and they nearly fall over again until she reaches up blindly and grabs the shower rod, the nails of her other hand digging into the skin on his shoulder.

He waits until her legs wrap around his waist before letting her go, grabbing her hands to place both on the rod above her head. She pulls back to give him a confused look but he doesn't look at her, breathing unevenly into her neck as she grasps the metal bar. His hands are in her hair, across her back, her stomach, her bum, and his mouth burns a trail down her body. She moans and he leans back for a moment, licking his lips, before bringing his attention to the expanse of skin between her breasts.

The hand on her bum squeezes and then slides down, down, and her eyes fly open when he eases a finger into a place she was sure no fingers should ever go. Most men didn't even want to know a girl had one of those, and here he was with his enthusiastic finger. She's so glad she took a shower right before, though it still must

be completely unhygienic, and the blush overheats her already hot skin. "I... I don't..."

"Shut up."

He doesn't remove his finger, and she thinks to tell him how gross it is, and say something rude right back - but then his mouth and tongue are burning hot on her nipple, his other hand is slamming two fingers inside of her, and she forgets to be indignant. Her back arches, the shower rod jerking in her grasp, and there's some odd, guttural sound coming from her throat. It feels as if there is stimulation *everywhere*, and she whines in a way that will embarrass her later, wondering which way to move her hips.

"Fuck," Draco swears viciously, and it really sounds like he's pissed off about something. He nips and licks his way to her other breast, and she catches sound against her skin as he mutters to himself. She tries to hear it but it's too low under the roar of the tap and the blood in her ears, and she's far too distracted to try and listen to something he obviously doesn't want her to hear.

His hands leave her at the same time and she sags with a disapproving grunt, her arms trembling. She looks down when her legs begin swaying, and his eyes meet hers for a moment before flicking toward the wall over her shoulder. He wraps an arm around her waist as she frowns, his tip prodding at her entrance before he thrusts up and pulls her down at the same time. She jerks into him at the movement, all her oxygen leaving her in a gasp at the *feel* of him. She could never get used to how good this was. Never, not ever.

She digs her fingers into his shoulders for leverage, her cheek pressing into the side of his head and her breath panting in his ear. She can feel his tongue on her shoulder and then his teeth, grabbing her backside to jerk her down harder and faster. She forgets about his inability to meet her eyes, closing her own against the strands of his hair. She moans his name, her heels digging into his bum and her nails scraping along his shoulder blades, until she's unaware of anything.

Thirty-Three

Day: 1474; Hour: 14

"Hermione."

"Hm?"

"I, er... I need to talk to you about Ron. And...Malfoy."

Hermione blinks four times at the book in front of her, the text blurring, and then raises her eyes to Harry. "What about it?"

"Well, it's just... He's been through a lot, and we need to be careful with putting too much on him. I don't know what's going on with you and Malfoy, or...or what it is, or anything. If it's something you need or...want..." Harry sighs heavily, shoving a hand through his hair.

"You're asking me to hide it from Ron." She looks at him blankly, smoothing the pages of her book.

"Yes. I mean, don't tell him. Try to...keep it to yourself for a little while. He might hear about it, or find out somehow, but he's going to need time. We worked with him before, but Ron didn't really believe the things we heard about him. He didn't work with him when we came back, like I did, to see it. I know you guys aren't like...like Ron and Lavender were, and I know you two don't feel like that toward one another anymore, but--"

"I understand."

"You don't look like you understand." Because she's thinking of Draco, of fragility and shame, and of the promises she made to herself. "I don't think he can handle it right now. He went through too much, and you and Malfoy... It's not worth getting Ron back to normal. Whatever--"

"I'll place worth wherever I want to, Harry," she snaps, and he looks surprised and then angry. "Getting Ron back his health, physically and mentally, is extremely important to me. Of course I'm going to do all I can to help with that. I'm not going to tell him about Draco, and I'm not going to...do anything in front of him. But I'm not going to stop...hanging out with Draco because--"

"I didn't ask you to."

"Okay. And if Ron somehow finds out, we'll handle it from there. And once Ron gets better… Whatever happens, happens. I don't expect either of you to understand, or to agree. But you'll have to accept it."

"I do. You know that. I don't know if I…approve." She opens her mouth, but remains silent when he shakes his head, shrugs, and stops being careful. "He's still an asshole. I don't get it. I know he's not prejudiced anymore, and he's on our side, but he's still the same git he was at Hogwarts. I know Ron and I were gone for…for a couple years, but…Malfoy? All the guys in the the world, and Malfoy for a boyfriend."

Hermione doesn't bother telling him he's not exactly a boyfriend. It would only make it harder.

Day: 1475; Hour: 10

Ron's grin is awkward when she pulls away, though it might be because of the tears now on his shoulder. Hermione cups his face between her palms, and she knows her smile is watery but she can't help it. She runs her finger down the thick scar on his face. It starts from his hairline and travels all the way down to his jaw. She wonders if it's the one Lucius had given him - the one Harry told her about.

"I missed you."

"I missed you, too." His voice sounds strained when he says this, his eyes darting toward Harry and his mother at the other side of the room before coming back to her. He gives her a look like she just said something he couldn't hear and then leans forward to kiss her on the lips.

The kiss is chaste, and his whole body tenses when he does it. Hermione blinks at the hospital bed as he pulls back, and then drops her hands to his shoulders with a reassuring squeeze. It wasn't like she had never kissed Ron, or even Harry, before. But those were usually when someone moved their head and the other missed the cheek - accidents that they were too close of friends for it to be all that awkward.

This was a little strange.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm a little…" He dropped his hands from her, rubbing the knuckle of his thumb

across his forehead. "I'm a little lost."

"That's okay." Her reply is almost too quick. Inside her it feels like a deep chasm. This huge void that feels impossible to jump across, to get to the other side, to get to him. There are too many things she can't say or ask, because she is afraid to know, and afraid that it might break him.

She feels as if she is playing with such a fragile thing that even holding it will bruise the skin. She can't imagine what Ron has gone through in the time he has been gone, and while she is filled with happiness that he is back, she is terrified of what he came back with. She wants to save him, but she doesn't know if she can, or how, or if he'll even let her. She's lost too.

"Healer Sorres has been taking care of you this whole time. I don't think the woman has even slept. When you're ready...she's going to want to ask some questions, mate." Harry is trying to be delicate as well, but his version is honesty while leaving out the hard stuff.

"What kind of questions?" Ron sits down on the bed, looking exhausted now.

Hermione sits next to him, reaching for his hand, because she can't find it within herself to stop touching him. To stop validating his movement, because he's alive, and because if he shatters she wants to catch every piece of him. She'll catch them all and stitch him all back together, and she'll fill in all the empty places with herself if she has to.

"We don't need to worry about that right now. When you feel like you can answer any possible question in the world, that's when I'll let them ask you." Hermione has no trouble taking this for fact when it comes out of Molly's mouth.

The older woman rushes over, hugging Ron as if he were a newborn and could nearly disappear within the love between her arms and body. Hermione releases his cold hand, listening to Molly's hushed words of comfort and love into the top of her son's head. Locks of red stick to the tears on her face, and Hermione has to blink several times to keep herself from crying as well.

Harry squishes himself in between her and the wall, grabbing her hand as she waves at her face, like the air could dry it all up. He squeezes it like it's going to be okay, but his palm is as sweaty and hot as hers. Somehow it feels like the two of them are intruding on something, yet they didn't belong anywhere else.

"Oh, come here," Molly laughs, her breath catching on it, as she grabs

Hermione's arm and yanks it too hard. "Oh, Merlin, I'm sorry...nearly pulled it off there."

Hermione huffs a laugh and scoots closer, her cheek against Ron's and her arm around his back. He pulls an arm away from his mum, wrapping it around her shoulders. Molly shifts and Hermione can feel her arm loop around the back of her neck, pulling her even closer. Harry drops her hand then, his leg brushing hers as he stand and leans down into the space between Hermione and Molly. The moment his arm comes around her back and his forehead meets her and Ron's , she promptly bursts into tears. Undignified tears. Loud, messy tears.

Harry's glasses go crooked against her face, and he's laughing oddly, like he might be crying just a little and trying to cover it up. He's smiling when she opens her eyes, and then she's laughing too, then Ron, then Molly. Laughing and crying all at the same time, and it's ridiculous, because she's happy, sad, and maybe a little crazy. Maybe just crazy enough to think they might be okay after all. They were one, two, three, and they would be okay.

Day: 1477; Hour: 7

Draco gives her a nod as he walks past her, barely looking at her, and Tonk's hair turns a vibrant shade as she grins. Hermione smiles back, returning the squeeze when the other woman reaches out to grab her arm in greeting. It had been too long since she had last seen her, but that couldn't be helped by either one of them.

The last time she had seen Draco was the night in the bathroom. With a kiss to the bruise he left on her shoulder he had been gone, sauntering down the hall and into his bedroom. She had stared at the empty spaces before turning off the tap and righting the bathroom, joining the young girl in the bedroom with no beds. It was really an empty room with spare blankets, and Hermione had stared at the ceiling thinking about too many things. Her pillow had smelt of shaving cream when she woke up the next day, and he had been gone from the house.

She knew that he acted like this when he wasn't sure about something. Perhaps it was because Ron and Harry were back, and he thought she didn't need or want him anymore. The whole 'attacking him in the bathroom' thing should have solved that, though. He might have still been angry over her leaving on that mission with Harry, or any number of things she couldn't know. It bothered her though, just as it always did. She hated when he got like this. At times she thought herself a masochist, but she doesn't know if she could even stop unless he made her.

The way he could make her feel, the way he made her lose herself, was worth

ramming into the stone wall he was outside of the bedroom. Or whatever place they happened to do the things they did in a bedroom. Besides, Hermione Granger has always liked a puzzle, and she would be lying to herself if she didn't admit that she cared about Draco. Maybe she could admit that she even needed him, just a little. Even if he was completely infuriating, an absolute pr--

"Are you heading this?" Hermione looks up at the tall, surly man in front of her, recognizing him but not knowing.

"Yes."

Lupin had asked her to bring a group of new recruits in to watch an interrogation and explain the different tactics and how to use them. Hermione had never really done one, but it didn't mean she didn't know everything about them. She had read about them, heard about them, and remembered watching one of them in the beginning as well. Draco's, in fact, and she has to physically shake her head to get the images out of her mind. Lifetimes ago, it felt like, when she was someone else and he was just a worthless traitor.

"Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"Bring them in then. It's started."

Day: 1478; Hour: 8

Ron is clumsy in his bones, like he has too many of them to put his trainers on without being all awkward angles. He had been like that when they were kids, as if he didn't know what to do with all the extra length in his limbs. Then he had pushed past puberty, grown out and into himself, and it went away. Not that Ron was ever graceful, but he was fully in control of his body and the strength behind it. Unless he was hungry - scary things were known to happen, then.

She thinks it's from the pain potions, or maybe from staying in the same position a lot when...he was gone. She almost bends to help him, but she knows his temper would flare if she did. That's one thing he never got that much control of.

"You don't have to go back, you know." Hermione says this so softly it is nearly a whisper.

"I'm not laying around anymore," he says gruffly, tying his laces.

"Stubborn, the lot of us." Arthur moves his lips in a way that might be a smile, and Molly continues wringing her hands as he draws her closer to him.

Arthur had only recently been released from the hospital himself. The combination of several Cruciatus Curses and the news of his sons had shut down his body and his mind. The amount of damage the curse had done was nearly irreversible, but once they fixed his body, his mind came back with it. His family needed him, and they were the most important thing in the world to him.

She had visited him once, standing as still as he was lying, with his broken body and glazed eyes. He began to move violently not fifteen minutes later, as if in a seizure. *Spell damage*, the Healer had said as he dragged her from the room. *It happens whenever he tries really hard to move. At least we know he's still in there*. Then the Healer had smiled, like it was suddenly okay.

The tremors would still come sometimes, but it wasn't stopping Arthur from rejoining the war. Nothing was stopping any of them, because they simply didn't know what else to do but keep fighting. Except for George. Hermione hadn't even seen him since before the Graveyard. She thinks half of his soul left with Fred, and though none who knew him would be the same again, she is afraid George will never come back from the darkness that filled up the cavities inside of him.

Sometimes she forgets to not think about it, and it feels like a razor slicing away all the things within her. There is a burning in her gut and a pain so sharp within her chest that she cannot physically move. All she knows is that she misses them, and that she's sorry. She's sorry because she is alive and they are not, and she's sorry because she could not save them. Sometimes, in the darkness, she'll lie in bed and wish she were dead. And it's not in the way that she would actually kill herself but that she whispers to them. *Will you come back and I can go? I don't like it here without you*, because if she could, she thinks she would give her life up for them to come back and live. She knows she will still not be able to be with them then, but at least she would know that they were alive, and maybe happy too.

Then she feels selfish, like maybe she isn't thankful enough. She wants to win the war for them, and she *has* to do great things now. She *has to make it count*. She can't *waste it*. If she does, then it was all for nothing. Then they all died for nothing. She thinks, *I'll go out today, and I'll smile. I'll do something I've never done before. I'll laugh and I'll love, I'll live and I'll be happy. Because I'm alive.* But sometimes she forgets, because she misses them, and there are days when the sadness and guilt overwhelm everything. There are days Draco puts the sugar bowl too far back on the top of the fridge for her to reach, and she gets angry. When she sweats too much, stubs her toe, or Harry laughs at her hair in the morning. She gets angry for stupid

things that don't matter, and she forgets to be happy and thankful, and she's sorry for that too.

"Where are we going?" Ron asks, pushing to his feet.

"Malfoy Manor," Harry tells him, and laughs when Ron makes a face.

"Why the hell are we going there?"

"New Headquarters, mate."

Ginny slings an arm over Hermione's shoulders as they start to walk out of the room, and Hermione hugs her. The redhead makes a face and smiles, like she thinks Hermione is a little weird, but that's Ginny. Hermione can see through her though, because the pinch of her mouth and the way Ginny squeezes her so hard her wrist cracks. They both laugh, and for a second, she forgets to be sorry.

Day: 1479; Hour: 11

"They are relentless," Hermione breathes, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

"They are *mad*. Bloodthirsty. I've never seen them fight like this. They just don't *care*." Harold pants, pushed against the wall beside her.

Death Eaters usually take their time in a fight, dueling with the same cockiness and air of superiority that they lead their lives with. Now, she thinks the only reason any of them are still alive is the distance between them and the rapidly approaching pack of black hoods. If it weren't for the minimal amount of time they had due to distance to duck for cover, they would have been defeated half an hour ago.

"We don't have time for prisoners today. Cast to kill, if you can," the Auror leading the mission tells them and the rest of the team, signaling to step out into the path again.

They step out as a unit, voices joining to form a fiercely loud "*Avada Kedavra*," and a few Stunning spells before jumping back behind the wall of the building. They turn, running around to the side of the other building to repeat the process, until there is no opposition left.

Day: 1481; Hour: 12

She begins to make her way toward the alley she had come from, her hand in her

pocket and wrapped tightly around her birth control, wondering why she doesn't give in and just use contraceptive potions. She's almost to her destination when someone rams into her shoulder. Her eyes widen at the impact and her hand automatically darts into her coat, wrapping around the end of her wand as she looks up. A man, around her age, grabs her shoulders, laughing at something his friend had said.

"I'm sorry!" He grins, and holds her steady before dropping his hands.

She manages to shake her head, him and his friends still laughing at something as they walked away. Her fingers drop from her wand, and a woman barely misses knocking into her, too enraptured with the man holding her hand. Cars zoom past on the road, music blares from a shop behind her, there's laughter and a hundred voices that rise up to her ears.

She takes a seat on a bench, oddly numb, waiting for a bus that she won't take.

Day: 1483; Hour: 18

She is still a gasping mess when he rolls off of her and to the edge of the bed, sitting up. He bends to collect his pants from the floor, and lifts himself up for just long enough to pull them over his firm bum. He reaches up to shove the sweat-dampened locks of his hair off his red face, and glances back at her over his shoulder.

She admits to her confusion, because it has been a very long time since either one of them tried escaping from the bed this fast. The bathroom thing she could almost ignore, but this is different. Even if they had somewhere to go, or were just done for the night afterwards, they never left so quickly. There were always several minutes for coming down and catching their breaths before a rather slow and tired extraction from the bed.

He stands, grabbing his shirt and pulling it on. The buckle of his belt clinks as he grabs it from by the door, and he gives her a brief nod before walking out.

Day: 1486; Hour: 6

She stays at the Burrow for two days, and when she leaves, she feels she cannot walk fast enough. The Burrow has always been a place of zaniness and chatter, and the silent grief that darkens its walls now is too much for her to bear. She feels guilty at her thankfulness for leaving, but this is not a place that she can stay and not hit bottom in.

Day: 1489; Hour: 12

Nothing happens for three days. There are no attacks, no captures, and nothing is found. No one knows if they should be worried or if it's okay to start hoping that the war is really over this time.

Day: 1490; Hour: 13

She has her boots and jacket off when she hears the squeak of floorboards. Draco is staring at her from the dark of the hall, and she ignores the sudden jolt of her heart at the sight of him. It had been several days, but she reminds herself of the last time they were together, of that dirty feeling when he could barely look at her. She can't read his expression, but there's a certain way he *walks* that tells her something is wrong. He's too slow, like his steps are measured.

"You alright?" She decided to be nice, even though she is a little angry with him. She doesn't know why they suddenly regressed so much, but it's not a pleasant experience. He is supposed to be her escape. He is supposed to make her stop feeling all those bad things she can't handle feeling anymore. And this isn't supposed to hurt.

He steps into the living room then, and she has to fight back a sigh. He's angry, his body thrumming with it, like an elastic band, plucked when you pull it tight. It might snap or it might hold together, but there really wasn't any way to know for sure. All she does know is that it's nothing she wants to deal with. She had spent the whole day as a delivery girl, which meant she had to run back and forth to different locations, delivering packages she wasn't allowed to see. It was a form of torture for curious people. She had gotten used to not being able to know most things that happened, but it was a true test not to open anything when she was alone and could do it so easily.

"Fine." This sounds more like a grunt than a word.

She begins to remove her holster, not sure about how to deal with him, when he's in front of her. He looks at her a moment, his eyes dark, and then reaches a hand up to grab the bun at the back of her head. She winces when he fists it, pulling her hair tighter, and doesn't really *think* when she turns her head away. All she knows is that she feels awkward, and angry, and confused, and when he bends his head, she turns hers.

It's the first time she's ever denied him from kissing her, and his whole body turns into a statue. His lips are *just* above her cheek, and he must be holding his

breath because she doesn't feel it on her skin. There are a couple different thoughts that skid across her mind, and she's stuck between regret and determination. Maybe she will kiss his neck, and deny him of kissing her mouth like he once did to her, as some sort of petty payback. Maybe he will leave now, even more angry, and maybe they were so fragile that this is the last time he'll get so close. Something had been bothering him ever since she got back from that mission, and now she has rejected him in the only truly vulnerable way that he opens himself to her.

Maybe he will think she's done, or that it's because of Harry and Ron. Maybe he will decide it's not worth it, or will close himself from her completely. But she can't be afraid of these things, because she's Hermione Granger - she's brave, she does what needs to be done, and she was supposed to be *happy*. She was supposed to be happy so she didn't have to be sorry.

Her heart pounds, so hard he might hear it, and she feels as frozen as him. There's a dozen implications and outcomes that make her thoughts a scrambled mess, and then she is speaking one of them before she can stop herself and he can move away.

"I'm not a war whore."

She blinks at the wall, wondering what and why she just said that over anything else. Some stupid term from a million conversations ago with people she couldn't remember about Seamus and Lavender, about people who slept around and later blamed lack of morals on the war, and *why* did she just say that? Her heart picks up speed, her face goes red, and she's pretty sure that a heart attack is going to hit at any second.

His hand loosens from her hair, his breath finally meets her face, and she *knows* he's about to walk away. "No." He shakes his head once, and he stays.

"And...I'm not that sort of girl. I'm not a girl who sleeps around with different people. And...oh, God. Y-you know I like routines. I like my routines. I get used to things. Then, all of a sudden, it's like it was in the beginning, and I guess you're angry, though I don't know why. Which is fine. But now you ignore me, and you don't look at me, and you...Jesus, you kind of make me feel...well, you do it, like that would be alright. And it's kind of not... I mean, I would like some sort of... Well, if something is bothering you, I would like to know. That's what I mean. That's the only thing I mean."

She only blinks because the terrified unblinking stare she had on the wall was making her eyes water, and she absolutely refuses to let him think she's emotional.

It's bad enough that she's blushing so furiously she's nearly on fire, and that her hands are shaking. She can't even believe she just rambled that out, to him, while he was here, listening, and looking at her. *Holy shit*, had she actually just done that? Threw herself on top of the gallows like it was the best place to be on a Friday night?

At some point in her stupid sputtering he had dropped his hand away from her and stood up straight. He hadn't walked away though, and she still couldn't meet his eyes. He was about three seconds away from laughing at her, she is sure. He's probably giving her a crazy look, and is about to ask her questions that she can't answer.

"What do you want from me, Granger?" Like that one. Crap, shit, damn, like that one.

"I just wanted to know if you were angry about something."

Because she had already revealed too much - had almost let on to the fact that he was a bit more than a lover, a frequent...shag, to her. They had never set expectations beyond neither one sleeping with someone else. There weren't supposed to be *emotions*. Their entire hormone-driven relationship was supposed to be convenient, not *emotional*. Sure, she thought of him as a friend, and sometimes she was pretty sure he thought of her the same, but they weren't supposed to really *care*. If they stopped having sex tomorrow, neither one should have cared at all, let alone if one didn't want to fall asleep next to the other.

"I am."

"Oh."

"Not with you." And then his voice drags over letters he doesn't form words with, as if he's unsure about telling her more. Probably because he *is* still angry with her. He must be. It's just that she isn't the *current* cause of the fury he came down the hall with.

"Oh."

She's even more confused now, and she accidentally looks at him when he huffs an exhale through his nose and leans away from her. He's still an elastic band, but different somehow. Maybe he's confused too. He bites his lips, thinking, and rolls his neck.

"What if I'm a war whore?"

She blinks at him, surprised to find a laugh bubbling up in her throat. It escapes a little, on a breath, and he looks down at her. Her heart does something crazy at the grey in his eyes, and *this is it*, she thinks. A couple more seconds and her arm will go numb, and she'll get these pains, and then she'll be really screwed. *What happened*? That's what they will all ask. *Oh, Draco Malfoy asked her what it meant if he was a war whore. She didn't get it. Then he looked at her, and* bam*. Looks are lethal.*

She is hysterical and she knows it, but there's nothing she can do. "Well, I kind of went into this…"

The blank look he crafted on his face is gone, his lips turning down into a frown and his eyebrows furrowing. She wants to run her finger over the wrinkles in his forehead, and she thinks she's breathing too hard. "Thinking I was a whore?"

"Well…the Lavender thing." She doesn't even like to say it.

"I'll have you know I've only," he pauses, as if searching for the right term, "shagged five people in my life."

That's a lot less than what she thought it would be. She's guessing his hesitancy before "shagged" meant he wasn't including oral sex. "Yes, well, I've only slept with you."

His frown is gone after she says this, and there's something on his face that she can't read. "I know."

"Okay." Then, after a second, "Sorry."

His lips twitch, and for some reason she finds this more alarming than the blank look. She doesn't know what to do with herself at all. "I can't believe you thought I was a whore."

She blushes more, a disgruntled noise in her throat. "It's not like I actively thought, 'Oh, Draco Malfoy is a whore'. I just sort of thought…you might be a little used to it. More than me, anyway, which isn't really saying a lot at all, because obviously…"

She trails off, wanting to stop her nervous yapping before she got ahead of herself. Before she said stupid things, *again*. She's wondering why he seems offended that she thought he was a whore, when just one minute ago he was asking

her what it meant if he was one. Perhaps he meant the non-emotional aspect, and he had really asked, '*What if I'm just in it for the sex?*' If he did, she had really, *really* given too much away when she told him she wasn't one. It's what she had meant, though. *I'm emotionally invested, to some degree, in you and this*, she had basically screamed.

He wasn't running for the nearest exit. She has no idea why not. Had he already known? Had she given herself away within those moments before she left for the mission, when she thought she wouldn't see him again? Did he somehow find out that she didn't cling to him because he was a person, because she thought she might die and he was just some guy who could make her forget, and feel good, and be alive? Did he see right through her, and to the fact that she did it because it was *him* ?

Maybe that was why he stopped staying. He figured she was too close, and he wanted to stop her from getting *feelings*. He didn't stop having sex with her, though. She doesn't know what that means.

"You think too much. It's half your problem."

She would like to tell him that it's his fault for never answering her questions. She can't analyze all of this right now, though, not when he's here and she doesn't know what is safe. She changes the subject to the only one he really likes for her to bring up. "I just wanted to ask that before…"

His eyebrows go up, and he rocks back on his heels, and she knows him. She knows him well enough to know that he's certainly not going to kiss her now, and that she'll be the one to have to do it. So she does, pushing herself up on her toes, and very much afraid of him rejecting her because she had him, or because of the things she had said.

It takes him four seconds, maybe just to make sure she knows what it feels like, before he kisses her back. She pushes her hands up his arms, her fingers catching around the holster over his shoulders, and she uses the grip to jerk him closer. His hands close around her hips, slide up to her sides, and then he reaches between the press of their bodies, pulling his wand and then hers.

He moves to tuck them into his pocket, and her hands move down, under his arms and over his ribs. "You better not lose that."

His fingers skate her jaw before wrapping around the nape of her neck. "I'll try," he murmurs before pulling her mouth back to his, warm and dry, leading them down

the hallway.

Day: 1491; Hour: 1

She decides not to think about it, about him. She doesn't want to think about the conversation they had, or the things she said, or what he asked, and what it could mean. She doesn't know the answers, and short of asking him, she can't know. She knew what it felt like to dangle out there, off the edge, and she didn't like it.

What she does know is that she is awake now, in his bed, with her hand numb on his shoulder, after several hours of sleep. What she knows is that despite what she had said yesterday, and despite not knowing what he meant yesterday, some part of it made him not rush off again.

When she first decided to do this whole thing with Draco, she told herself she would just let it go where it was going to go. That's what she was going to do now - what she *has* to do, even. She didn't have the space in her life to be confused, and she wasn't ready for it to be over. Not yet, anyway.

Thinking was half her problem, he told her. So she thought about not thinking, and she thinks it might be okay to think about remembering not to think.

Right.

Day: 1492; Hour: 11

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God, oh, my God." The woman was yelling this so quickly that the words started to blend into a scream, her eyes pinched shut and her hands over her ears, as if that would make it all go away.

Hermione's back was to the wall right next to her, breathing quick, two Aurors in line next to her. Donny, the youngest one, was grimacing down at his leg, the red of his blood almost black against the cement. They had followed her like an unofficial leader when everyone got split up, and she feels responsibility clog up her veins like the blood does the gaps in the pavement.

The woman's scream in her ear blocked out the others all around them until she drew a breath, and Hermione reaches over to yank the hand away from her ear. "You need to run. See that building, with the gargoyles, up ahead?"

"What?" Panic, solid and harsh.

"*Run*," Hermione yells, thrusting her hand out in front of them.

The woman takes off, wobbling on her heels and her briefcase left behind. Hermione wipes the sweat from her forehead before it can drip into her eyes, the hot summer air thick in her lungs. She moves to the edge of the building and darts a look around it, spotting someone convulsing on the ground, but no Death Eaters. It had been that way since they arrived. Hermione hasn't actually *seen* a Death Eater, though she knows they must be somewhere, given the colors that streak across the sky and the Dark Mark alive in the clouds.

She thinks they must be on the top of the buildings, and Lupin had agreed with her, sending half the team into buildings to get to the roof once the anti-Apparition wards were in place. The other half were separated, fleeing to areas that looked clear while dodging the jets of curses that came out of nowhere. They also had to avoid getting shot by a dozen Muggles, eyes glazed, shooting at everything that moved. From their state of dress and soiled skin, she guessed that they had been prisoners before the attack.

She can only hear two guns going off now, and the screams had died down when most of the Muggles had taken off. They would be caught further out by the Obliviation team, and would go the rest of their lives never knowing what truly happened. The few who managed to slip out would never be believed, because there would be others that had been there who had never seen the crazy things that they did. They would probably be told that the Muggles under Imperius had gone and become murderers while their families had worried and waited for them to return, thinking kidnapping and death. The families of those that died would blame more innocent people. The newspapers would say the killers were put to death, but the Prime Minister would step in, secretly, and send them off into isolation to never know the world or the ones they loved again.

This is her enemy. This far-spreading disease of destruction that ruins the lives of people who could never even know what they lost it for. The Muggles, the normal people in the world, confused, scared, and in pain, without even the chance of defending themselves - of even knowing what could come. The broken families, the darkness of the Burrow, the tombstones, the scars, all the empty places in their lives that will never be filled up again. This is her enemy.

There are still a few people running back and forth, stuck from trying to avoid the 'fireworks' and bullets. Others are shoved under abandoned cars, and she had passed one woman with her head bent on the steering wheel and her hands folded. The screams were mostly coming from those who had been hit with curses, hexes, or bullets. Laughter echoed around the streets, a rumble under the noise of anguish.

Metal shrieked, bricks crumbled, glass shattered, and fire crackled. She has seen twenty-four bodies - twenty-two Muggles and two Aurors.

The Muggles couldn't stand much of a chance. It was their duty to defend them, but they had come so late and took too long to find the Death Eaters. Hermione walks with their blood on her boots, and she feels sorry for this too. She has found that in war, no one is ever really good enough, and she has learned this in all the hard ways.

Thirty-Four

Day: 1493; Hour: 8

Hermione blinks, startled, and lowers her hand. "Ron…you were talking to Shiver?"

"What?"

"Shiver…the Auror, staying in this room. He's planning the miss--"

"Oh, no. I didn't know whose room it was… I thought it might be open."

Ron was usually very focused unless one of two things walked by him - a woman or food. If it happened to be a woman *with* food, whatever he had previously been focusing on became a lost cause to his attention. Ever since he came back, *anything* drew his attention away. He was constantly scanning every detail around him, like something might jump out from the peeling wallpaper and launch at him.

She knows that she should expect this. While she understands, she can't help but feel that he should be more relaxed with her. It's disconcerting to see one of your best friends of the last decade become cautious and wary of you. She wishes that her friendship, or anything in the world, could be strong enough to stop that. She wants to be the thing he can hold on to, but she doesn't know if he will let her be.

"No, tough luck with that. Harry put your trunk in the room with him. I think it's the one by the kitchen… You can ask him at dinner. Is Shiver in there?"

"Tough luck," he repeats, a small smile pushing its way onto his face. She grins back at him, at the smile, but he's moving away before he can see it.

Day: 1493; Hour: 14

"He has some memory loss."

"How much?" Hermione asks, pulling her knees to her chin on the old couch. Her toes fit perfectly inside a torn slot in the cushion. She doesn't know how many times she's slid her foot inside of it while interrupting Draco's viewing pleasure of infomercials.

The sound had gone out on the television at some point and a commercial plays of a woman running through a wheat field, endlessly in silence. Harry sits beside her, his arm pressed into her leg, and his hat pulled low on his head. His glasses are clenched in his hand as he rubs his eyes in exhaustion or frustration.

"I'm not sure. I don't want to ask too many questions and freak him out, just in case it's a lot. He already has to take that calming draught for his anxiety. I know he doesn't really remember the Graveyard. I know he remembers the mission we went on before that, but he doesn't remember getting freaked out by the spiders on him when we were there."

"It's normal to block some things out. It's the mind's way of coping. Not to mention... Well, we don't know what happened to him, Harry. It could have...affected things."

"Yeah," he says softly, bending forward to rest his forearms on his legs. "I think I'm going to bring him with me to the psychiatrist."

Hermione feels her shoulders go back in surprise, turning her head to look down at the back of his head. "You're seeing a psychiatrist?"

"A 'Transitionist', they call them. The Ministry sent one while I was still in hospital. Lupin asked me to talk to this guy... I didn't want to, but I did, because they wouldn't let me leave until they made sure I was alright. It helps, a little. I can tell him the worst thing in the world and he's under magical oath to never tell another living thing. There's no judgment, or..."

"Or?"

"I don't know. It was hard at first, but then it was kind of nice. Someone to tell me what way was up, but still be unattached. It's sort of like...talking to yourself. Talking it out. Having things make sense or just... I feel better when I leave. I think more clearly. I start moving on. I guess that's the point."

"Oh." She nods and acts like she understands, but there's some mix of emotions tangling up at the pit of her stomach and she's sick with them.

"It's not like that," he whispers, bringing his head up to look at her. She reaches forward to slide his glasses back up his nose. "I thought it would be easier to talk to someone who was there, who *is* here, in the war. Those are the only people who could really understand, and who could know why I did the things I did because they did them too. But it's... You should come."

"Come?"

"To one of the sessions. Just to try it out and see if you like it. You know, it helps to talk to someone who has been there, like you. But…the point is to get through it, right? And it's easier when the person you're talking to doesn't have anything to get through themselves. It makes it easier to just…move on. With me, it doesn't help me to know that someone else is going through it too. I don't think it would help you either. You would be too busy trying to help the other per--"

"Didn't you say-"

"I don't really talk about…you know, how I feel. I just say stuff that happened. Sometimes she's wrong but she usual-- She gets it right. Like…like it's all universal. And it makes me think that maybe every one of us is feeling the exact same thing. That you are. That Ron is. That maybe I can fix-- It's more just understanding. I need to sort through things, and… I--"

"I'm not trying to tell you that you shouldn't go, Harry. I think it's a good thing."

"Yeah?" His smile is incredulous and endearing, and she has to smile back.

"Yes, of course. I'm not offended. Everyone…everyone has to do this their own way. I get it."

He nods, throwing his arm over her shoulder and pulling her against his side. "I figure I'll bring Ron to one. I'll talk about something the both of us are dealing with so he can get the feel for it. Hopefully he'll decide to do it on his own. Do you want to come with us?"

"No," she answers quickly.

He pauses, as if to weigh his words, and she can't remember a time that he's done it before. She has to keep reminding herself how much they've grown up. "I think you should try it."

"Harry, you know me. I'll be psychoanalyzing the way they psychoanalyze me." She laughs, he doesn't. "I don't want to talk to a stranger. I don't want… I just don't. Maybe after the war."

"After the war? Why? Things have already happened, Hermione--"

"I'm aware of tha--"

"They are just going to keep piling on. What do you wa--"

"I'm handling it the best I can right now. Talking might be good for you, but it isn't good for me. Not to a--"

"You're trying to ignore it now. Just last--"

"I can't ignore i--"

"Exactly. Hermione, sometimes we need more help than we can give ourselves. Trust me, I know. I'm the one who needed you and Ron through all of Hogwarts and--"

"We wanted to help."

"Well, these people want to help us. It's like their cont--"

"I don't *want* their help, Harry! I just told you that people have different ways of coping! I accepted yours, why can't--"

"You're not coping! That's the whole--"

"Yes, I am! What do you want me to do? Crawl into bed and cry myself to sleep? Not be *able* to sleep? Feel bad about being alive when they aren't, and feel so much guilt I even feel it for the families of those I-I-I... Because I do, Harry! I've done all of these things, and I've cried until I thought my head would explode! It doesn't matter if there's some stranger watching me while I do it, it doesn't *help*! Nothing *helps*!"

Panic. A desperate, rushed sadness that makes the heart thump wildly, burns at the back of the eyes, clogs the throat, tightens the chest. The sort where you have to scream just to keep from crying but you're constantly rocking on the edge of it. About to break into a mess of salty tears and choked sounds. She feels almost frantic with it and she doesn't know where to put her hands, but she fists one into her chest, rubbing hard, trying to loosen up the hurt.

"You don't know! How do you know if you don't *try*?" He looks at her, his eyes pleading, and she hates it.

"Because I do! The only thing I can do is help win this war and try to live my life, and be *happy*. Be happy *for them*, because they can't be. It's either that or I lose my mind and crawl into a hole somewhere, Harry, that's all I've got! Someone telling me it's *okay* will not ever, ever, *make* it *okay*."

"Hermione."

"I just have to *accept* these things. I have to accept that they are gone, and that I have done…bad things, Harry. Very bad things. Every morning that I wake up, I forget for a couple seconds. I think of Neville laughing with me over Draco's surly attitude, or Justin making faces at Lav's cooking. I think of Fred putting dye in my shampoo, Seamus saying something perverted about the sausage, or--"

"I know."

"No," and it comes out like a sob. "No, you don't, or you wouldn't be trying to make me go. Every day I miss them. Every day it hurts. But it's *mine*, Harry, and I have to do this my way."

"Alright. Okay, fine." He pulls his hands through his hair and her own are shaking at her sides. "I'm just worried, Hermione."

His arm comes up to loop around her shoulders and she falls awkwardly against him. She wraps her arms around his chest and wipes the tears off her cheeks on his shoulder. He blows out a hard breath, and she knows he's trying to get her curls away from his face.

"I'm still scared," he whispers into the mountain of her hair. "It wasn't ever really about being scared of facing Voldemort. Kinda, yeah. Mostly, it's been about being scared of losing you, and Ron, and the people I love. Lupin, the Weasleys, and you - that's all I really have, Hermione. I… I don't always do… I'd give and risk anything for the family I have left. I *need* you."

She sniffs and huffs, trying to swallow past the burn in her throat to keep herself from crying again. Harry Potter still needed her. Not to die for him, or try to solve the latest puzzle, or research until her eyes almost fell out. He just needed her, simply.

He pulls away from her, still uncomfortable with hugs after all these years. He always got flustered, like he couldn't understand the mechanics. She loved them. She loves him. "Are you trying to guilt trip me, Harry Potter?"

"No," he laughs, grabbing the exit door to a heavy conversation. "When did you start thinking everyone had ulterior motives?"

"Not everyone. Not usually."

"He might be rubbing off on you," he says, and they both know who he means. "How long has that...?"

"Awhile."

"Oh." Harry plucks at a loose thread in the leg of his jeans, staring hard at his kneecap. "He treats you well?"

There's an odd laughter that bubbles up in her throat - some mix of hysteria, panic, and disbelief. She wonders if she'll ever get used to talking to Harry about this. How long it will take for her mind to join these two worlds that were forced to separate for so long, because they had to join. Because she can't let go of either one.

"Yes. I told you that."

He nods, clearing his throat as he pushes back into the couch. "You know, I thought he might try to curse me after Italy. Railed on me for ten minutes, at least, and I wondered why he was *so* hacked off about the mission. Then I thought, maybe..."

He turns to look at her and she's already focused on him. It feels like every inch of her, every depth of her senses, are concentrated on him alone. She can hear the evenness of his breaths, the scratch in his throat when he speaks, the pluck of his fingers on the fabric of the couch. She thinks she might be able to pick up sound at the other end of the house with how hard she is listening.

She feels a bit ridiculous, but she has learned that answers come through many things, and the hardest ones arrive unexpectedly or as slow and pain-ridden as extracting bones with your teeth. Getting answers from Draco was the former - always difficult, beyond reason, and with a sort of masochistic dedication. She still hasn't reached the depth of him. The part that told her all those things she sometimes admitted she wanted to know, just so she *could*. So maybe she could make sense of her own head. So maybe she wouldn't be so afraid of it anymore.

"What happened?" she asks when his silence becomes too much and pressures her skull.

Harry gives her a curious look. "He didn't tell you?"

Of course not. "Remind me." It comes out a little too demanding.

"At Mungo's." He shrugged, like it was sufficient enough information or

something. "He went off. Then I went off. I thought maybe it was about Justin at first. I...sort of forgot about you two after everything. Then he asked me what I would have done if you were killed. If I value Ron's life so much over yours that I don't care. I asked him if *he* actually didn't trust *me* with your life. With caring about it. He told me he wouldn't trust me with the life of a maggot, so...there's that." Harry sounds bitter, his eyes angry on the silent television.

Hermione pauses, going over the things she could say that she hasn't already fought with him over. That they might never find middle ground on. "I know you care about me."

"*Of course* I do. That was the only bit he said about you - mostly just went off about everything else. But when I thought about it later... And you know, wands were drawn. Thought for a moment that I might have to defend myself, and...later I wondered how you would feel about that."

Hermione looks at him knowingly. "Just to defend yourself, Harry?"

"Mostly."

She huffs and shakes her head, looking at the television as a woman smiles over bottled water. "I think I would have been upset with both of you."

He stares at her for a moment and then nods slowly, the living room falling quiet.

Day: 1494; Hour: 18

Hermione can feel her heart pound in time with her feet. It slams against her chest, and her blood pulses through every part of her body. She can even feel it in her eyes, her sight flickering as she crashes into the doors in front of her. Had the knob not turned she would have ended up on the ground from the impact. Her mind is whirling so quickly she had nearly sent up the sparks letting them know that the outside of the building was cleared. It would have been a major mistake, alerting any Death Eaters inside that they were there. Given that she hadn't seen any colors flashing by the windows, or heard any screams or explosions, their presence was still a secret.

Candle flames dance along the walls, making the room glow a burnt orange, and shadows move like people, like monsters, all around her. She had heard the Nott residence was creepy when they had first raided it, but she had thought they meant it in the way that Malfoy Manor was still a little creepy - the memories in the walls. This place is darker, all stone and morbid portraits. The air is thick and moldy, dark

red curtain blowing across dusty furniture as the wind tunnels inside. It has been years since the mansion has seen a house-elf, but they had gotten word that a small nest of new Death Eaters have taken it as their own the past month. The lit candles are proof of that, if nothing else.

The macabre of the room makes her slow down, but just barely, reminding herself of the threat. Her feet are still too loud as she takes off down a hallway, and she's mid-sprint when a hand grabs her by the back of her shirt. Her eyes bulge, her breath catches, and she launches herself forward.

There's another hand that grabs her then, yanking her back again. She swallows the scream and spins, one hand out and knocking into the person's head, and the other holding her wand out. She hears something skitter across the floor as she loses balance between the pulling and her spinning, ramming her wand into the mass with all her weight before registering the face.

"Ha--" she starts, and he slams a hand over her mouth so hard it hurts her teeth. His palm is wet against her equally drenched face, the July night humid and stifling.

She pulls her wand back, and her whole body moves when he lets out a shuttered breath, his eyes darting wildly. He pushes her off his chest, dropping his hand and bending to retrieve his glasses from the floor. Lupin comes out of a room scowling furiously.

"I can't find Ron," she whispers as low as she can, her hands still shaking in panic. "He was behind me, now he's gone."

"We have to go up to the second floor, this one is clear. Are the grounds?" Lupin hisses at her.

"Where did you last see him?" Harry's face has gone pale in the candlelight.

"We'll find him after, we're in the middle of a mission. We need to backup the team on the sec--"

"Outside. He was behind me, now he's gone," she repeats, her mind concentrating on only one thing, her shock and fear fading everything else out.

"You checked--"

"Don't even think about--" Lupin starts, but cuts himself off when he darts forward to grab Harry's arm.

Harry is gone though, racing down the hall, and Hermione follows. She can hear Lupin behind them, and it's all pointless because she already searched the grounds. She had circled three times before heading to the house and...and there he is.

"Ron?" Hermione whispers.

Ron is standing at the bottom of the steps to the door, looking wide-eyed and nervous, his wand tapping against his leg. She can feel Lupin's anger radiating into her back, but she's too relieved to care. She had thought she lost him again, right in front of her this time.

"Lose your way, mate?" Harry asks slowly.

"Yeah, a little."

Day: 1496; Hour: 10

Lavender takes a long drag from her cigarette, leaning against the phone booth that would bring them into the Ministry. Her other arm, fake, is limp and stiff against her side. She is on break from what she referred to as her *fucking desk job at Practically Pointless*. She had taken the job at P&P three days after she left St. Mungo's - Hermione had been surprised she didn't take off and leave the war behind.

A man shoots them a look as he steps inside of the phone booth, making a face and tucking his nose into his shoulder. Lavender doesn't even notice him, because this is the way she gets when she hasn't seen Harold in a week. Sometimes it takes Hermione back, how much Lavender loves him. Needs him, even, she would say.

Hermione scuffs her boot against the pavement, staring at the gleam across the black. Harry had pointed his wand at them the day before, giving her a dark look when she made to protest, and they were clean a second later. She feels like she lost something, and then she feels stupid for feeling like that. She has a certain way she likes to do things, even if it doesn't make sense to other people. No one else had found it bothersome enough to clean them before. Not even Draco when she tracked dark red mud across his trousers.

She tucks her hands inside her pockets, rocking on her feet. Some days it is harder not to think about him constantly. Especially today, when it feels like weeks since she has seen him, and everything around her is muted from the overcast--black, grey, white, and blue. He would look good next to her, standing against the backdrop. Maybe with his hair caught in the wind, and he would have the co--

"I really want to disappear," Lavender speaks for the first time since she asked Hermione to come with her on break. "But I can't while I'm still waiting."

Hermione turns her face from the refreshing chill of the wind, and doesn't ask her what she's waiting for. She thinks she already knows. Lavender smiles, to herself, to the thoughts in her head, and taps the ashes off her cigarette.

"I want to go to the top of a mountain," Lavender nods, raising her hand into the air and staring up at it, a ring of smoke dancing from her fingers. "Asia, maybe. I want to see mountains, and clear water, and fresh air. I'm not ever going to wear clothes, and I'm going to bury my wand somewhere until I need it again, because I don't ever want to see it. I want to get fat--"

Hermione laughs. "I'm going to ask my mum to make so many bad, sugary things for me, she'll be shoving me into her chair at the office after a week."

"Exactly!" Though Hermione is pretty sure Lavender has no idea she's referring to Dentistry, or even what it is. "I want to get married and learn how to cook. I want to learn how to do everything with only one, stupid arm, and not feel rushed. I want to sleep whenever I want, and never worry about a thing. I want to forget the world, both sides of it, and I don't know if I'll ever come back."

Hermione smiles, wrapping her arms around herself at the break of thunder, expecting the rain any moment now. "It sounds nice, Lav."

"Would you hold it against me?" Lavender is very serious now, her cigarette burnt so far down to her fingers that it must burn, but she doesn't seem to notice. "Would you hold it against me if I never came back to see what this turns into?"

The question reminds Hermione of something. Another moment maybe, in the dark, and being very afraid. "It depends," Hermione whispers, knowing grief, knowing the different ways they had to heal.

"On?" Lavender smiles, flicks her cigarette, and pulls Hermione into the phone booth with her.

"On if I can visit, I guess."

They both smile at one another, laugh a little. Lavender turns her head away, still smiling, but Hermione can see the faded sun glint off the wetness on her eyelashes.

Day: 1497; Hour: 11

"Do you want to take this from him, Hermione? Are you going to go up there and tell him he can't go, that he has to just *sit* there in his head? *Remembering* everything they took from him and did to him, and he can't do a thing back? He got confused! We all have!"

Harry is angry and fed up with her, his eyes sparking dangerously. Hermione had been telling him about Lavender's new job and brought up the idea of Ron working there. Ron had been scaring her lately, and one of the last things she wanted was for something to happen to him when she had known he wasn't *there* enough to fight. Harry had turned from casual, to determined, to angry in the last ten minutes.

The woman exiting the bathroom earlier had given Hermione a look like she was crazy. But this was Harry, *her* Harry, and she couldn't give a toss if people thought he was the most powerful wizard of their time. What she did give a toss about was how much he wasn't *listening* to her.

"He's not fit to go-" she tries.

"From the stories I heard, you weren't either, but no one stopped you. No one took it away from you. Don't you dare, Hermione."

"I can't lose him!" she yells, throwing her hands up.

"Well, I can't either! Don't try to make it out like I don't care, because that's rubbish, Hermione! That's such shit! Don't you dare say I don't care about him, that's my best mate, and--"

"I'm not saying that at all!"

"He needs it! You don't have the right to take that away from him. I'll watch his back, I'll be by his side, but I'm never going to take this from him! And neither are you!"

Day: 1497; Hour: 13

Despite her lingering anger, confusion, indecision, and busy thoughts, she still grins when she sees him. He raises an eyebrow at her greeting, sprawling his legs out in front of him, but she can see his lips twitch as he looks back to the silent television.

"You were right."

It takes her a couple seconds to know what he's talking about. He probably knew she would bring it up and wanted to get it over with. "You heard?"

His eyebrow raises so high that his eye twitches a little, like it always did when he was incredulous. "Shouldn't you be doing sign language if you thought I was that deaf?"

She rolls her eyes with a muttered "Shut up," and looks up toward the ceiling. As if she can somehow know by looking there if Ron had heard the argument as well. If so, he and Harry are probably complaining about her being overprotective and bossy, and maybe some things she doesn't want to hear.

"Weasley isn't fit for missions, but nothing is going to change him going on them."

"He should be pulled." She plops down on the couch next to him, her shoulder banging into his, and he lets out a low grunt but doesn't move.

"Mm."

"Would you pull him, if you could?" she asks, and Draco is silent. "Honestly?"

He gives her an annoyed look because there are few times when he isn't honest with her, unless he chooses silence over either. "It's a war, Granger. You could argue that we're all fucked in the head by this point. Or you could argue that none of us should be fighting in it at all."

"Yeah, but Ron--"

"I know." He scratches his jaw, his arm moving against hers, and she might lean a little closer. Might force some of the weight in his presence onto her mind so it pushes down everything else, until she can just feel him and be with the things she knows. "You, Potter, his family - you're all still fighting. You pull him from missions and he's got nothing to do--"

"P--"

"Sit and plot missions all day? That'll go well. Get off from work and go sit with his brother - the twin? You'd be leaving him to his own head. Whatever happened to him... He's not coming out of that unless he fights his way out. No matter if you like it or not."

"So you don't think I'm right." She might have sounded a little too miffed, judging

by the amusement that flashes across his face.

"I said you were right that he wasn't fit for missions. Take what you can get."

She snorts and stares at him as his eyes narrow on the boat chase whipping across the screen. "So you actually agree with Harry."

His mouth twists and his look of scrutiny turns into a glare as he swings his eyes to hers. "Are you not satisfied until you spread your shit mood to everyone or are you just concentrating on me?"

"Oh, like--"

"Put yourself in a bedroom, alone, for a week. Just a week. It's easier to keep moving when we're moving towards something. The next mission, the next week, the end of the war. Every day is a fucking goal here."

"I know that."

"I would hope so. So you take that away - you stop the movement and you stop it by yourself, then all you have is what the war was and is and did. You only have what it gave you and you're not moving through it. Weasley hasn't had time to put any of it behind him yet. To deal with it. You make him stop now… You should have left him in Italy."

She pauses, her fingers tangling around her knees. "But it's his life. We make him stop now, then we can help him later. We'll have the *chance* to help him later because he's *there*."

He stares at her for a long moment and she watches the flick of his eyes journey across whatever he is trying to read on her face. "There's no coming back from some things."

"So what about the end of the war?"

"With the way you think, what, are we all just screwed when the war ends?" He glances away from the television to look at her and she shakes her head. "I don't believe that. And if you do, then you've already given up on yourself, and that's entirely stupid, Draco."

"I did-"

"What's the point of this war if it's not for it to end and to have peace after? I know that we're fighting for other things, fighting for other people, but...but maybe there has to be a part of us that fights for ourselves, too. Right? For happiness. Because if we don't... We might live past the war but we didn't survive it, did we? It would take *everything*..." He stares at her and she can't catch the emotion on his face. "Frankly, I thought you were too selfish for that."

He raises an eyebrow, giving her a warning look. "I don't know if I appreciate your word choice, but if you'd like, I can show you how selfish I can be."

She doesn't know exactly what he's threatening her with, so she ignores it with a sniff. "I meant it, though. About ourselves, I mean."

She hears him breathe twice, low and deep. "I know."

Day: 1498; Hour: 12

There is no air conditioning in the safe houses, or any way to get cool air besides an open window and a hope for breeze. It's sweltering inside the house, and the heat they built between them only makes it worse. They are both gasping for oxygen in the thick humidity, the sheets soaked under their dripping sweat.

If she could find room for it beyond the places owned by him, she might care about the state she must look to be in. Her skin feels fire hot, red with all that blood rushing up, and shining white in the places the sun can reach past his back. But he's just as hot, wet, a mess as her, and she can barely get a grip on his shoulders with her hands slipping.

His tongue presses to the base of her throat, humming when she fists his hair. She breathes an awkward laugh when he slips from her and she slants across his lap, but the disjointed feeling leaves when she feels his mouth curve into a smile on its way to her jaw.

She digs her knees into the mattress to right herself when his arms slip around her and he pushes forward, pressing her back into the mattress. He shifts, his eyes meeting hers, and she can barely breathe through all that hot air and the way he's looking at her. His hair is matted to his head, forehead, and the sides of his face, and her eyes track a drop of sweat down the line of his nose as he leans forward to kiss her. His mouth presses against hers for just a second before he's panting out laughter.

"My eyes just went crossed, didn't they?" She might have blushed if she had it in

her.

He pulls back to look at her, grinning, and the sight of it packs up a demand in her chest that has her reaching for his head to pull him back down again. His fingers attempt to grasp her jaw as he kisses her back, his tongue dipping along the curve of her lip before he's gone.

"Shower," he huffs, and she doesn't even have time to open her mouth before his slick hands are pulling her off the bed and toward the door.

Day: 1499; Hour: 7

She didn't encounter foreign soldiers very often. The rare times she had, they had been a part of bigger battles, or had shown up when the Death Eaters attacked in their country. In the beginning of the war there had been small groups from several countries, but they worked on their own for smaller battles. Hermione isn't really sure how it works, or if there are any still in England. They always left afterward, to their own safe houses or their own country, and they just became more strange faces within the smoke and dark.

Hermione knew them by their uniforms alone, which she had sat and memorized, to avoid another incident like the one in Surrey. A group of people had shown up within the smoke, all wearing uniforms. Most of the team had thought they were another country, and that confusion was the reason behind the "friendly fire". It took them two minutes and two deaths before they realized the group had been Voldemort supporting citizens.

Hermione feels the coldness creep over her skin and slide down the walls of her stomach a moment before the woman stops screaming at her in a language she can't understand. She knows what it means, her eyes automatically flashing toward the sky. The sudden silence that covered the town breaks in force as curses and spells are cast again.

She presses herself against the edge of the building, her hands splayed out over the brick, and her mouth puffing vapor in the temperature drop. She scans for any Death Eaters and then raises her wand toward the sky, waiting for the Dementors to come into the line of her sight and wand. She thinks of things; beautiful, happy things.

Running through the sprinklers with her parents, getting top marks at Hogwarts, her arms wrapped around Harry and Ron. She remembers being covered in mud and drenched in ice water, laughing on the kitchen floor next to Draco. She thinks of

summers at the Burrow, with the Weasleys all laughing over one another. Her family, their skin sparkling with Christmas lights, and her breathing grows quicker, waves of sadness threatening to wash it all away.

She concentrates harder, ignoring the shaking cold. Draco scowling, soaked in orange juice, and her and Neville clinging to one another so they didn't fall over laughing. The Gryffindor common room; Harry and Ron playing chess, Lavender dancing with her arms in the air and Neville laughing as he joined her, Seamus's rogue grin, the Patils giggling in the corner -- all before the war was really a war at all. The screaming of the crowd when Harry caught the snitch, Krum spinning and spinning her, and catching lightening bugs along the river. Draco, with his crooked grin, and then kissing her, his hands hot on her cold cheeks.

The team behind her yells out curses over her shoulder for three seconds before the Dementors come into view. She sends out her Patronus, like she has done dozens of times over the course of the war. The Dementors shriek, shrinking back with her sadness against the power of her memories.

Day: 1499; Hour: 15

Draco's hands are cold compared to the heat of his mouth, and she tries to rub warmth back into his skin. She doesn't know how long he had been standing outside in his boxers and boots, his hand clenched around his wand and his eyes trained on something buried in the horizon. As soon as the back door had clicked shut behind her he had spun, wand aimed, and a dangerous look on his face. It had taken several seconds and just as many blinks for him to register it was her.

I thought it was the werewolves, he had muttered, looking back out toward the horizon. His face was strange when he turned to look at her again, as if willing her to see something she didn't. Instead, she had kissed him, and she doesn't know if he's shaking from the cold or something else.

Day: 1499; Hour: 21

The Death Eaters have murder pacts, it seems. Twice they had gotten close to capturing two high ranks that would know more about locations and plans, and twice another Death Eater had killed them before they could be caught. It is obvious the Death Eaters are planning something, not content at all to back down and go into hiding. A frantic sort of restlessness takes over the safe houses and the Ministry, fear and hope mixing in that urgent way they felt before the Graveyard. But now the hope is quiet - bone deep and raging, but everyone is silent in wishing for it to be the end.

Thirty-Five

Day: 1501; Hour: 17

She can feel the girl's mouth open against her palm the second she puts her hand over it, and her voice comes out more like a hiss than anything comforting. "Sh! I'm not going to hurt you. Don't move and be quiet."

She had been Apparated into the wrong side of the town center, but it still only put her about twenty shops over from the yelling she could hear. They had had no Portkeys to the location when they were called in for backup, and it had taken them an unacceptable fourteen minutes of Flooing the Ministry before they found someone who could bring them there. Hermione had been the first person Apparated in and, after informing her that he would Apparate the rest to the other side, the man had left her on her own.

After running past one store front, Hermione had spotted the young girl in a small alley between two stores while idly walking toward a clothing shop. Hermione had wondered if the girl was deaf as she grabbed her, just three paces from hitting the main road and exposing herself to the fight. Perhaps it was the indifference of being fourteen and feeling immortal. Hermione hadn't known ages of that, but she had moments of it. Of feeling like the world could never touch her.

The girl raises her shaking hand, pointing to something in front of them. Hermione swings her wand in that direction, pulling them two steps back while searching for what the girl sees, before her wand is yanked out of her grasp. Hermione freezes, her vision blurring in surprise just as an elbow slams into her stomach. She coughs over the expulsion of her breath, releasing her grip for just a second, but it's long enough for the girl to jerk away from her.

Her surprise is quickly replaced by her anger as she lunges toward the girl, the younger female clutching the wand and grinning. "I tol-- *Shit*."

The girl's grin is matched by the Death Eater that steps out from the shadows at the side of the alley, realization and fear bursting in Hermione's chest. How did she not *see* that? How had she let herself be so distracted by the girl, like she is new to this, like she doesn't *know* better. Hermione throws herself forward at the girl, but only manages to grab her sleeve, the material ripping under her grip as the girl shoves herself back. Hermione curses viciously, screwed without her wand.

"Don't touch me, Mudblood! I'm already going to have to burn my clothes and scrub my face off!"

"I suggest you do as she says." The Death Eater waves his wand at her, as if she hadn't already seen it. His voice squeaks over the middle word, and she takes in the smoothness of his face and the small height he has over the girl who now stands next to him. He can't be older than seventeen, if that.

Fantastic. Everyone is on the other side, she has no wand, and she is stuck in an alley with two young teenagers with the upper hand. Her only real hope is to distract them, hope they couldn't cast anything too damaging, and then attack them the Muggle way until she got her wand back. Or run, if nothing else.

Fear is churning in her gut and her heartbeat is static, the adrenaline pulsing along her limbs. She expects to feel dizzy with panic, but she isn't. Instead, her senses are sharpened, everything clear and vivid. She is taking in every movement they make, and for a moment the girl looks uneasy, until she remembers they are the ones with wands.

"I can't believe that worked," the girl laughs out, handing the wand to the boy, and Hermione wants to punch her in the face.

She can't believe it worked either. How could she be so *stupid*? She had faced hundreds of Death Eaters with decades of magical education and plotting, and only one had gotten the best of her. Had Stunned her from behind, injured and hectic, and new to war. Now, here she is, with years of hard experience, cornered by *children*. Granted, she is only a few years older than the Death Eater in front of her, but war made them animals - they lived years in just one.

"You knew they would be coming in from the back!" The girl straightens her spine in pride before snarling at Hermione. "Mudbloods are stupid. Or are you a blood traitor? I haven't decided which one is worse."

Hermione is running through what to say, taking in the information that they don't know who she is, when the boy speaks up. "Can't talk, filth? I can make you *scream*. In fact... *Crucio*!"

She has just a second to hope it doesn't work, moving to try and dodge it, before it does. Her back arches with the pain that rips through her, as wild as fire and more brutal than the worst she remembers. She flings her body back, as if it could make it go away, and her scream tears out of her clenched lips. It is a dark pain, a cloud of black, that shoots through her whole body and feels like it pulls, tears, cracks, and

cuts everything it touches. It feels like forever that she is trapped within a world of black and agony before it finally ebbs, pulsing through her body in waves.

She becomes aware of her breath and heartbeat in her ears, the grunts of pain, the spasms of aftershock in her body. Then she hears the laughter. "If anyone else comes, we won't be able to sneak up on them."

"It doesn't matter," a new voice says, sounding pleased.

"It does. There's only three of us, so if there's a lot of them..."

"We can still--"

"He said to be silent, so we have the advantage from the back."

"Make her silent."

"Where the fuck is the fun in that?"

"So...what are you going to do with her?"

"Let me count the ways."

"Entrails-Ex--"

"Save her for later."

Hermione slowly brings her fingers into fists, curling her toes, and trying to regain movement through the fading pain. She thinks that maybe she should play dead until they come over, and then try to overpower one. However, she doesn't doubt that they are staring at her now moving and breathing, and that they would see right through her. So she rolls over instead, her body trembling as she forces it, pushing herself to her feet.

She sways unsteady before locking her jaw and her aching muscles. The three people in front of her, two Death Eaters now, laugh through their condescending noises. "A little fighter, huh?"

"Give me my wand and I'll show you a fight," Hermione spits, grabbing onto her anger and holding it tightly to her.

"Do you think we're as stupid as a Mudblood?" The girl's smirk turns into a sneer.

"I think you know you're weaker than one. Why else would you be afraid to give me back my wand when it's still three against one?" She would tear them apart. She just needs to find a way to get the advantage.

"Are you fu--"

"Disrespectful--" The female begins to hiss, but is cut off by the furious snarl next to her.

"*Crucio!*"

The pain is back and this is all she knows. The world is silent except for a shrill ringing in her ears, her senses shutting down to deal with the pain. Her only thought is about how destroyed she feels, as if there were never another thought to possibly be had. It is just beginning to fade when it comes back full force, her body violently arching before the vastness of black engulfs her. She might be dying, and if she does, she might not care. If only to stop the pain, she would take it. For however long the torture lasts, it steals everything from her, clouding her mind until death seems the best choice.

Then, a few seconds after it begins to throb away, she is back, struggling to push through. She opens her eyes, blinking away the fog of agony and her tears, her breath catching over injured noises in her throat. Her convulsing slows to trembling, her senses coming back, as a masked face comes into view. It's the first Death Eater, his lips pulled back over his teeth as he grabs her shirt, yanking her up. She raised a hand to punch him, but the weight is heavy and not fully under her control, her wrist barely hitting his temple. The adrenaline overpowers the hungry ache within her as he casts a Severing curse over her head, and her fist collides more solidly with his face.

"*Hermione*," someone screams so hard it sounds like it tore their throat raw, and she is sure it was Harry right before the world disappears.

It is dark, wherever he Apparated them to, and Hermione knows what comes next. A prison cell, torture, eventually death. Moody's voice is yelling through her head, reminding her to never let them take her from where they found her. If they did, he had said, do everything in your power to get away before they lock you up. Once they do, there's almost no chance.

No chance, no chance, no chance. He had her wand, and if she couldn't get that, she could get his. Even if it was so incompatible she couldn't use it for anything, she would break it and then she would break him. She would fight until her hands were

bloody, and dead, and gone, and she could no longer fight anymore.

He yanks her forward when she jerked back, and she slams her fist forward, feeling his teeth scrape her middle knuckle. Pain collides with her knuckles and jolts up to her elbow, and he lets out a choked, heavy yell, his breath hot on her skin. The heel of his palm slams into her cheekbone, reeling her head back as she stomps her foot down into his. She immediately raises her leg to knee him *somewhere*, and her hand clasps around his throat only a moment after he grabs hers.

He grunts out the beginning of a spell, but she shoves his arm away, tearing nails through the skin of his neck. It's back a moment later, and she grabs for the wand this time, the spasm of his magic coiling into nausea in her stomach. She can't breathe through the pressure of his fingers, adding to the dizzy spin of adrenaline, and she can only hope that her vice grip on his neck is enough to stop him from speaking any spells. The Curses she took before have made her too sluggish, and her muscles feel heavy and stiff. Her entire body shakes as she tries to push his wand point toward him, and he shoves her into the wall despite all her efforts to not let her feet move.

Survival, survival, and she can feel his wand slip a fraction from his grip before he tears his hand away. His fist collides with her temple, jerking her head to the side, and her jaw cracks off the wall. Her lack of oxygen is tempting her towards unconsciousness, but the panic of this being her last effort gives her the energy to bring her knee up in rapid succession, and she grabs his wrist before he can cast. He pulls away from her, his throat moving and clicking under her palm when he releases her neck. Her gasp is deep and harsh, and she continues to gasp between the coughing as he pulls her hand off of him. She curves her fingers, her nails ripping up skin, and kicks a leg out at him.

"*Stupify*!"

She ducks automatically, the red light bursting into the wall near her shoulder, and it takes her a moment to realize it wasn't from the Death Eater in front of her. She throws her fist forward, punching the boy straight in the gut. She feels a hard yank of her hair followed by a tearing sensation before she hits the ground on her side.

Hermione punches her leg out, her foot connecting with his kneecap, and the Killing Curse hits the ceiling in a cloud of green. He had cast the Curse in the direction the Stunner came from, which could only mean that she wasn't alone anymore. Plaster rains down in chunks and dust as he buckles, falling on top of her, and another jet of green hits the wall where his chest had been. Hermione doesn't

have time to think about how she just saved his life before another Killing Curse hits the wall a fingers length from her nose, and she screams. She punches the boy in the side of the head as his hand closes around her throat again, and reaches to grab his outstretched arm as he sends another Killing Curse toward who she was hoping was a member of the Light.

He's limp a second later, his head smacking off her jaw as it drops, and light floods the shadows they're in. She can't see for a moment, but blinks through the foggy image of Lupin and Draco on a staircase. Draco chokes over the *Ked* in the second word of the Curse, an odd silence filling up her head. Hermione shoves the Death Eater off of her, looking at the two of them staring back in shock, and scrambles away from that combination of soft and rigid death. Her body is trembling, jerking randomly, and the whole of her aches. But she can't think of it now, or give into it, so she clings to her adrenaline instead. It provides a numbing effect that she knows will be gone soon enough, and she has things she has to do.

"Gra-- Why the *fuck* didn't you say your name?" Draco barks, choosing the most important question to him out of all those he could have asked. "I could have... I could have *killed* you, you dum--"

"Were you captured?" Lupin interrupts the furious blond, eyes scanning the house around them.

"Yes," Hermione croaks. "Is this place empty?"

"For now. We received information that the Death Eaters in the square would be coming back here. Do--"

"Granger, do you have--"

"That's where I was. Took down the wards for backup to get through. If they Apparate out, it looks like they'll be coming here until they catch on." Hermione rasps the words out, her throat tired and dry.

"Do you have any idea how fucking stupid that was?" Draco rushes out before he can be cut off again, his voice furious and his eyes flashing.

"I was a little preoccupied, Draco!"

"Well, you should have been thinking! You obviously weren't. You obviously weren't *at all*! Did you *want* me to kill you? Did you--"

"Enough. We need to set up posts in case any more come back. How man-- Are you alright?"

It takes her a couple seconds before she looks up at Lupin. "I'm fine. I need to get back."

"She's been Cruciated." Draco still sounds angry, and she has no doubt he would have still been yelling at her if it weren't for the situation.

Because he could have killed her. He really could have. He or Lupin had come inches from it, in fact. "Hermione, you should App--"

"I'm fine, I said!" She's angry too, because she had been stupid too many times tonight and she is angry with *herself*. She is angry at the girl who tricked her, and if she were that kind of person, she might have still been angry with the dead boy she flips over.

She doesn't notice how badly she's trembling until she's ripping his robes open, feeling for the inside pocket she had watched him stuff her wand into. She doesn't look at his face, or his eyes, because it makes her think too many things.

"I'm not sure if you're able to..."

She snaps her head up, looking past Draco and to Dean. There are three more people behind him on the staircase, all of them staring like she's some kind of show. She pulls her wand out of the pocket, feeling it thrum in her hand, and lets out a breath. She stands, wobbling, and Lupin and Dean reach their arm out, despite that she's too far away to catch.

She closes her eyes, concentrating and preparing herself to enter anything. She forces her hands steady and Apparates on Draco's snarl of her surname.

Day: 1501; Hour: 19

"How did it go with the...therapy thing? With Ron?" Hermione whispers, eating another piece of chocolate.

Harry's watching her from the recliner, his hands folded with his knuckles too white and his gaze too intense to be relaxed. She had joined the fighting for fifteen minutes before it was over, almost half of what she casted coming out useless from the shaking. She had found Harry during head count, and he had run to her, hugging her so tightly she couldn't breathe as her toes scraped the ground. She had

collapsed into him, and it had taken him five minutes to get them back to a safe house, drop her on a couch, force feed her chocolate, and stare hard enough to make her uncomfortable. *You scared the shit out of me*, he had whispered into her cheek. *You freaked me out so bloody bad*.

Harry often looks at her like this - like he's planning the best way to lock her up somewhere nice until the world got better. Sometimes it makes her angry, and other times it feels good. She has to be so strong that sometimes, in Harry's eyes or Draco's arms, she likes to feel protected. Just to know that for a little while, someone else has got her covered. The truth is that she had been very afraid as well. If there hadn't been a team infiltrating that house, who knows what would have happened to her. Or even what would be happening to her at this very moment. The possibility is so terrifying she can't sleep, no matter how exhausted she finds herself.

"It didn't, ye--"

"What therapy thing?" They both look up toward Ron's voice in the doorway. "Therapy?"

"Yeah." Harry clears his throat, sitting up straighter and reaching a hand up to scratch his temple. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to join me in--"

"I'm not going to therapy." Ron says this with a cold laugh, like Harry might be insane and it disgusted him.

"It's a Transitionist. They're magically bound to not tell anyone anything you say--"

"Unless you're going to hurt yourself or some-- or an innocent person, of course," Hermione interrupts, trying to take some of the glare off Harry, even if it was his idea.

"You just talk about anything you want."

"There's no bloody way," Ron practically growls, his face white compared to the red that usually comes with his anger.

Hermione hadn't expected him to be *angry* over it. Especially when he found out that Harry was seeing one. If anything, she thought Ron would have shrugged and tried it out, or just told him he wasn't into it. Maybe he isn't ready yet to face anything that happened. She can understand that.

"Mate, just come to a meeting with me. You don't even have to talk. Just see if you like it."

"What the hell do you talk about, Harry? Your *feelings*?"

A blush burns Harry's neck and cheeks, and he looks down, almost ashamed, as he struggles for a response. Hermione gives Ron a glare, forgetting to be gentle. "Everyone has different ways to heal, Ronald. Everyone has *feelings* about what has happened, and has to deal with those *feelings*. If you--"

"I don't need to deal with them! I have nothing to say! Especially to some per--"

"Then don't go! It was just an offer, Ron. You know you can always talk to us--"

"I don't want to talk to you either," Ron snaps, cutting her off. The room falls into silence, and there's a lot of hurt between them that may or may not be justifiable.

Hermione takes a deep breath, and it shutters, feeling the tiny cracks that splinter between the three of them. She feels as if she has to constantly fight now. For the war, herself, her friendships, for the people she cares about. She is scared of many things, but right now, she is most scared of gaining them back just to lose them again. She suddenly understands exactly what Harry had meant when he asked her to go to therapy with him. They might all be together, in the same room, but the war still threatened to take them away from one another. They were all pulling in on themselves, and there are so many empty spaces and broken things. Harry was trying to save himself, but he was also trying to save them.

"Yeah, well," Harry pauses, shoving his hands in his pockets and staring out the window, "if you change your mind, let me know."

Day: 1502; Hour: 3

She's not sure how long she slept on the couch, but she wakes up with an extra blanket on her and it's still dark outside the window. She lifts her head, looking up at the recliner, and gives a jump when she sees Draco sitting there instead of Harry. No wonder she had woken up - her survival instinct must have been set off by his angry glare.

"One second, Granger. Maybe two. That is how close I came to killing you. You would have been dead. I would have been staring at your corpse when Lupin lit up the corner, and I would have murdered you. Do you have *any idea* how much you fucked with my head?"

"It's not like I did it on purpose. I was a little distracted by the--"

"I don't *care*. How hard is it to say your name? It's common sense! We couldn't se--" He cuts himself off when she bursts into tears, smacking her hand over her eyes, because maybe if he couldn't see it, he wouldn't know. Maybe putting her hand over it would somehow grant her the ability to disappear. She wanted that so badly sometimes. To burst into the air.

She had been captured tonight. She had been cornered, tortured, captured, felt the widening cracks in her friendships, and now this. She can't *help* but cry. She never used to cry so damn much, and now she can barely control herself. She wipes the tears away quickly, sucking in air and trying to focus her mind on potion ingredients to calm herself. She hates breaking down, and she's done it too many times in front of him.

She could have said her name. She should have, but it was the last thing on her mind. She can only imagine how she would have felt if the roles were reversed. If she had been the one to almost kill him, or even to just imagine coming one second away from it. She imagines herself on the staircase, and then the light, and seeing him dead with her wand trained on him. There would be no coming back from that. What it would do to her is impossible to say, but she knows he has a right to be angry. "I should--"

"Get out." His voice is like steel, cold and hard.

She drops her hand away from her wide eyes in surprise, but he's not looking at her. There's an Auror standing in the archway to the living room, Draco's heavy glare leveled on him. He's perfectly still for three seconds, opening his mouth, but then closes it and turns to walk out. Draco watches him until he's gone from the hall, glancing at the floor, and then looks at her.

"It's been a long night."

"Yeah," she croaks, and then clears her throat. She lays back down on the couch, but they're both still looking at each other. He should know the unlikelihood of her falling asleep while he was staring at her. "Where are you sleeping?"

He might smile for just a second, or it might have been in her head. His eyes flick toward the archway and she closes her own for sleep. "The rooms are all full. Does it bother you to sleep in the same room as me?"

Later she will think of things she would never actually say anyway. *Only when*

you're so far away. Only when you're not naked. Or, even a sarcastic *Yes, it totally freaks me out.* "No, it's nice," comes out instead.

Day: 1502; Hour: 4

She's circled by a dozen masks and black hoods, their mouths twisted and taunting. She spins, their faces and voices circling like a carousel. Like the one her parents would bring her to in the park, when all she knew was something else. When she, in her new summer dress, would hold on to the spiral out of the horse's back, her head thrown back and her curls dancing on wind. Her parents would lead her away, a hand clasped in each of theirs as she kicked her feet up into the sky. She would laugh until it hurt and she was dizzy with her joy.

Her wand is broken into four pieces, biting hard into her palm from the pressure of her fingers. This is the end. Her life, the war, had led her up to this very moment, and it is the last one of all. Something slashes across her stomach, her back, through her arm. Then there is all-consuming pain, splintering her into tiny fragments, and she screams so hard she tastes blood on her tongue. Her back hits the ground, the laughter echoes around her, and there is blood like a waterfall above her head to wash in the darkness that will follow.

Hermione gasps, choking, as she is lifted up against something hard, warm, and shaking against her. She opens her eyes to darkness, to the sound of crying, swallowing metallic. *This must be death.* She tries to shove it away but it holds her tighter, her head reeling back to see... Grey hair in the dark, an ear, a shoulder, a curve of a jaw that she knows. Her mind whirls, and she blinks out into the darkness, just making out the recliner bouncing in her vision.

"D-D-Dra..." She trails off at the jolts of her voice.

The light in the living room comes on, bursting white and blue spirals into her vision, and forming a tightness at the back of her eyeballs. She squeezes her eyes shut, and she thinks she must have been dreaming before. It still doesn't explain why she is shaking violently, a deep ache roaring to life inside of her. She must have bit her tongue, still tasting blood. There's someone talking behind her, but she can't hear, noise muffled and slow in her ears. Draco moves to pull away and she tries to lift her hands to stop him, but her arms are trapped between their bodies. She pulls her fingers in instead, bending them hard to make room in the empty space, and they drag into his skin and clench his shirt. He pulls her back, tighter.

"Potter, are there any..." Draco's voice, right next to her ear, but still muffled. She can't hear Harry at all, and she wonders if she's dreaming again.

Something is very wrong and she can't help but be scared. She feels like she is convulsing, but she had nightmares before, and none of them had ever done that to her. Then she remembers the Cruciatus Curse, three times that night. She had never had this sort of reaction before, but she knew it could happen. Something with the nerves, muscle memory, and the brain. Certain things could set it off, and sometimes nothing at all. Episodes could last anywhere from one second to hours, and if it was bad, the person was usually fed a sleeping potion, a calming draught, or were bound so they couldn't hurt themselves.

"Hey. Hey, calm down. Breathe, Granger. You need to relax. Deep, even breath."

It's not until he says this, his voice mimicking the calm he wants from her, that she finds out the burn in her throat is not just from crying but also from hyperventilating. She tries to concentrate, closing her eyes. Her body is jerking between his and his arms, and by the power behind the jolts, she knows she would be thrashing violently if he weren't there. One of his palms is pushing against her head, his cheek hard on hers. One arm is squeezing across her shoulder blade and keeping her upper body pressed against him, the other around her waist. Her arms are locked between their chests, her fingers in the neck of his shirt. It takes her a couple seconds to be sure the weight she feels is him sitting on her legs, and she's still on the couch.

"Hermione, breathe," he snaps.

Between his angry tone and the black dots, she realizes she had started to hold her breath. She gasps in, on the verge of hyperventilating again, before calming herself. She focuses on the rise of his chest against her, slow and steady, and aims to match it.

Later, when the shaking has gone and she is a crumpled mess against him, she will feel the exhaustion like thick metal over her skin. *Sometimes I don't want to be strong anymore*, she'll whisper, and for once, Draco will be silent instead of telling her she has to be.

Day: 1504; Hour: 9

Some days, when the rain doesn't persist and the clouds are not consuming, the sun will hit her like an explosion. She'll step into a room, and it will be lit up with gold and white, and for a moment, everything is new again.

Day: 1505; Hour: 8

"Is there anything you want to talk about today?"

Hermione looks away from the pleasant smile in front of her and toward Harry. He had sat down so close to her that she feels trapped between his side and the arm of the couch. She doesn't know why she has to actively calm herself down at the feeling of suffocation, but she does. Harry doesn't notice, blowing strands of hair out of his face, and looking distinctly nervous himself.

"Will anyone else be joining us?" The woman in front of them is watching Hermione rub her arm, where it is still tingling from the oath of silence they had cast on one another when she entered the room. Hermione drops her hand, blanking her expression.

"He decided against it," Harry mutters.

"Ah. Does that anger you?"

"It's just frustrating."

"Because he has the option to attend, and you do not?"

Hermione blinks slowly at the woman and then her head jerks toward Harry, as if to make up for taking too long. What did she mean, *you do not*? Harry is staring at the floor, but he glances at her from the corner of his eye, his jaw clenching once.

"I just thought it might be helpful. He's been through a lot--"

"Harry," Hermione whispers, like it couldn't be heard by the woman through the silence in the room.

"What?"

He *knows* what. "Can I speak to you outside for a moment?"

"I assure you, anything you say will remain private in this room. The spel--"

"It's not exactly private when you're listening in, is it?" Hermione cuts her off.

She watches the woman track her expression, from the knitted eyebrows to the pursed lips, and Hermione is even angrier. She doesn't *want* to do this. She doesn't want to sit in a room with some stranger telling her a bunch of crap and listening to her *issues*. She doesn't want some random person analyzing everything she does,

says, and in *what way*. Hermione can read and research, and give the a woman a ten foot essay on her own psychological examination, and it would be *right*. She doesn't *need* or *want* this.

She had come to this stupid meeting for Harry, because she thought he might need for her to. Because he had such faith in how well it worked, and *now* she finds that he's being *forced* to attend. What was this? Did he want her there because she was some emotional wound, like how everyone seemed to walk out of a psychiatrist's office blaming their mother? If Harry--

"Tell me what you're thinking, Hermione?"

Hermione breathes out loudly, ignoring the woman, and turns back to Harry. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Don't play stupid, Harry Potter. You didn't tell me you were *ordered* to see this...this *transitionist*."

"I didn't tell you it was my choice, either."

"Why is this important to you, Hermione? That he--"

"This isn't about me," Hermione snaps. "It's about why he pretended that this was his choice. Harry, you talked it up to me like you had-- You most definitely implied that this was your choice! We said we weren't going to lie or hold anything back any--"

"Hold anything back? So when you don't want to talk to anyone about anything that's happened, or the nightmares I hear you screaming from, or our friends, or what you've done in the battles, or--"

"Harry, that--"

"--still angry with me about things, about leaving you. How you're angry with Ron too, or even what's happened to Ron, or--"

Hermione jumps up, stepping away from his hard side and the dig of the couch, and he stands as well. "How many times do I have to tell you that I'm dealing--"

"--went on the next day like you hadn't been convulsing and crying on Malfoy

for--"

"--is the only way that I can handle all of this. I'm *trying*. I've been trying since this war first--"

"--want to talk about it. Hardly ever! And maybe I don't always know what to say, or would know--"

"--something that I have to handle on my own. Sometimes I want to talk, and usually I don't! I need to *heal*, and that means I have to work through it on--"

"--yes, I didn't. But it doesn't change the fact that I want you here. She asked me to bring the people close to me, that--"

"I didn't come here for me, Harry, I came for you! Because, like you just said, you *wanted* me here. I saw what happened when you asked Ron--"

"So why does it matter? Yeah, I wouldn't have done this to start with if I weren't ordered to, and I--"

"Exactly! Then you became all angry with me when I didn't want to come--"

"--wouldn't, but it doesn't change the fact that it's been helpful, and that I think you need this. I want something to *fix* us. Me, you, Ron--"

"---ritical of you, Harry! And we can fix ourselves without some stranger trying to tell us what's wrong! We can do that ourselves, and--"

"--through so many things, and I know you did as well. You act like I don't get it sometimes when--"

"--all of this... Because you don't! Because you *left* me! Because you and Ron ran off somewhere without *me*, and I was *alone*." Harry's mouth is still open, but empty of words now, and she clenches the hem of her shirt in her fists. "You don't know what that was like. You were my only friends, and my family was out of reach, and it was the beginning of a war. I was so *scared*, Harry, because I was supposed to be with *you* and *Ron*. You were gone for *years*, and all these things happened, and you weren't there. So, no. You don't *get* it!"

Silence. Like there had been a black hole that opened in the ceiling, or like something had just exploded and left her deaf. Harry's hands drop, smacking against his legs, and it echoes out. His eyes are frozen on hers, that searching, bright green,

and they shine in the soft lights of the room. She blinks, and blinks, and realizes that they're shining too brightly - that he might be crying soon. The hiss of air through the cracks in her clenched teeth prove her guilt.

Harry didn't need any more guilt. He absolutely does not need it. And she shouldn't be the one to add on to that. She is supposed to be his friend. She is supposed to be his best friend, and best friends should understand and forgive without needing the explanation or apology.

"Maybe not," he whispers, vowels cracked, and the ball in his throat bobs as he swallows hard. "I want to try, though. Yeah, they're making me do this. But I think it helps a little, really. I talked about you and Ron so much, she asked me to bring you. I said no, but after everything… I thought it might help us all. I was honest."

"Okay." Because she's on the edge of a cliff, and if she breathes too hard… If she breathes too hard.

"I'm sorry I left. I'm sorry I told them Ron, instead of you. I'm sorry I didn't fight harder to get you. But they weren't having it, and when they didn't say yes or no to the Graveyard, I… I needed to know you were safe. I went in thinking, Hermione and Ginny are safe. It hurt you, but I still wouldn't change that. I needed you safe. Ron already knew everything…I couldn't stop him."

"It shouldn't have been your choice, Ha--"

"But it was. You've fought so much, and then all of Hogwarts you… I had a *choice* to make sure, without a doubt, that you were safe that night. I took it, and I don't regret it a second. You've fought in so many missions, Hermione, I've seen your bloody folder. You've seen a dozen battles that were the same as that, only I was to kill Voldemort that night. It wasn't--"

"It *was*, Harry. This war… I'm fighting in it for a lot of different reasons. I got used to you being gone. I figured it out, no matter if it hurt or not. But that battle, that one…it was supposed to be the three of us. It was *always* supposed to be us. Before the world even knew, it had been the three of us. You took that from me. Standing at your side, and watching him die. Standing at your side, and fighting the whole wa--"

"I didn't need you at my side." Her breath shutters, and he looks desperate. "Hermione, I needed you safe. That was the greatest thing you could do for me. As far as leaving you…I'm sorry. And I'm sorry that I don't know what else to say, or how to make that better."

"It's fine--"

"It's *not fine*. Stop saying it's fine!" His anger flashes again, but at least the shine in his eyes is gone. "There's so much...I... With me, you, and Ron, it's... I want to fix this. I *need* to fix this, Hermione. I don't know how, but please let me try." Always trying to be the hero, Harry. Always trying to save everything.

"Time," she says only, because she can't seem to force more out. Because she doesn't trust the waver in her tone, or the burning clog in her throat.

"Let's just try this," he says, waving a hand toward the woman, no doubt sitting in rapt attention, that Hermione is doing her best to ignore. "If it doesn't work, then I've got time. Loads of it. I've got a *lifetime* of time."

She would like to tell him that the war isn't over yet, but it feels too harsh in her throat and chest. The possibility of him being wrong is too heavy for her to even consider. So she nods, slowly, and his smile is faltering.

Thirty-Six

Day: 1506; Hour: 11

She glances up at the fluttering sound of leaves, watching the breeze dance through the trees out the kitchen window. Her hands still from their furious scrubbing of the dishes, the steam from the water making her even more sweaty. She closes her eyes as the breeze sweeps through the window, rolling across her heated skin. Some of her curls escape the hazardous looking bush of frizz clipped to the top of her head, and they stick to her skin.

She breathes in deeply, opening her eyes at the sound of padding bare feet behind her. She almost drops her mug at the fingertips on her legs, inching up the skirt of her summer dress. He presses against her back, his hands pushing farther up.

"You know, one of these days I'm going to think someone is trying to molest me, and do you some serious physical damage." He doesn't respond to this at all, and she wonders if he's trying to freak her out. "I know it's you."

"I would bloody well hope so," he says with a sneer, a bit disgruntled. Probably because his hand had taken the liberty of cupping her through her underwear, and if she didn't know it was him, she should have stopped the person back at the fingertips stage.

She hurries to wash the soap off her cup, and he tucks his face into her neck, his stomach moving against her back as he breathes in deep. *Your scent is everywhere*, she remembers, and presses tighter against him. She raises her shoulder in an attempt to push him out, because she probably reeks of sweat and she feels gross. He doesn't budge, brushing his nose against her jaw, and then his tongue swipes at her skin. He breathes out what might be a laugh at her noise of protest, wrapping his arms around her waist when she tries to wiggle away.

She frowns, her eyebrows furrowing as he kisses to the strap at her shoulder. She wiggles again, and he wiggles back, catching the strap in his mouth and pulling it down. "Draco..."

"No one else is here."

"I know, they left this morning, but--"

"We'll hear them if they come back."

"I know." She studies the feel of him through the thin material again, and turns her head toward his questing mouth. "Are you naked?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

She laughs at him, and his lips curve in a smile against her chin before meeting her own. The kiss is lazy and sweet, like the ones they sometimes share in the morning, when they're both too groggy but need it anyway. The hot day, combined with their body heat against one another, is creating a fever between them. It covers their bodies like an actual pressure, making movement feel like a lot of effort. If they shag right now, she's almost afraid of heat stroke.

"Let's go swimming." It's out of her mouth the moment she thinks it, and it feels like the best idea she's had in a long time. She hasn't gone swimming in *years*, and her excitement is quick. She doubts he'll agree, and she can always go by herself later, but she hopes he'll come.

She also doesn't know if she should risk going by herself anyway. After the... After her episode, it wasn't safe to go swimming around in deep water. She didn't know if she would be able to make it back to land if it happened again. Anger and self-pity begin to coil in her stomach, and then he's speaking again.

"What?" He looks at her like she's crazy, and he's considering taking several steps back. She shrugs and washes the soap off her hands.

"We'll go to the lake." The one he told her about forever ago. The one where she watched the sunrise and he lost his ring.

He looks like he just stepped in a wad of gum, and she grins at his wrinkled nose before turning off the tap. "Right now?"

She nods her head a little too enthusiastically, clipping his chin, and mutters a distracted apology at his injured noise. "Or you can stay and sweat to death."

She's out of his arms and out the door before he can reply. Her need for cool water and fresh air drives her halfway there before she decides trampling through the woods without shoes wasn't a brilliant choice. She has just enough time to start wondering if Draco really wasn't going to come before she hears him behind her.

"Forget something?" he drawls as she gingerly steps over the threatening edges

of stones, and navigates around thick tree roots.

"Only something with which I can hit you," she mutters, and glares at him as he passes her. He had obviously had the mind to remember shoes, shorts, and his wand.

"What was that?"

"Hm?"

He gives her a look over his shoulder, his boots leaving a path of destruction. "Any slower and you'll get there by winter, Granger."

"Then I would be dead. Lack of food, for one." His skin is gleaming from the sweat and the sun, and she drags her eyes down the definitions in his shoulders, arms and back as he walks.

"Let's not forget the possible suffocation from your hair, should it get any bigger."

She ignores him, and only feels mildly perverted when she begins ogling his bum. It's not like he would ever know. She's pretty sure she has the right to anyway. "Then I would have to come back and haunt you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I won't be some friendly ghost either. I'll hide dead fish in your bedroom. I'll ruin all your favorite clothes--"

"Will you pop out and yell 'boo' at random times as well? I'm scared, Granger. I fear your cleverness."

"Those will just be to throw you off. Then I'll start the revenge murder schemes. Catch you off guard."

"After telling me your plan?"

"Draco Malfoy's End: Death by Slippers. Your tombstone will read, 'He Should Have Brought Her Boots'. Everyone will say, '*oh*, how ominous', and I'll just point at you and laugh."

"Death by slippers?" He sounds appalled at the prospect. "And you're about as terrifying as a Hufflepuff, Granger. I doubt your ability to trick me into death when

you can't even remember your shoes. Furthermore, I don't think you have the nerve."

"You should start begging for mercy now," she sniffs.

"You're going to be the one begging." He gives her a wicked look over his shoulder, and comes to an abrupt halt at the edge of the lake. "You can--"

He cuts off when she sails past him, running into the water and diving under the surface. The water surrounds her in cool relief, stealing the heat from her within the silk of its embrace. She emerges with a grin, shoving her hair back from her face, free from the baking humidity.

Draco's scowling at her from the edge of the lake, and she shakes her head at him. "Are you not getting in?"

"I'm just making sure you don't break out in infection, or something doesn't eat you from the murky depths."

"Scared, Malfoy?" She inches closer to him.

"Hopeful." He smirks.

"You can stay in the shallow part if you're nervous. Can you swim? If you start drowning, I might consider saving you." Just a little more. His eyes drop to her breasts, and she looks down as well, remembering that she had gone without a bra today. Her dress is clinging to her, and she sinks down into the water at the sight of her nipples pressing against the fabric.

He glares at her. "Is this your attempt at manipulation?"

"That depends on if it's working."

"Since it's not, I'll take that as a yes." His smirk is wiped away with the wave of water she sends at him, splashing against his legs. He looks at his skin like it might start melting off, and slowly raises his gaze back to her.

"Feels good, doesn't it?" She smiles when he toes one of his boots off, and laughs at him when he hops around on his foot, trying to pull the other off. "The water is pe--"

She cuts off when he raises his head, his eyes narrowed and calculating. She had

thought he was in a rush to get into the water for the relief of it, and not for the sake of revenge. She points her finger at him as he peels off his socks, shaking her head.

"It was only a little spla--" She squeaks when he starts forward, her arms circling twice to propel her backwards.

She turns toward the other side of the lake just as he dives under the water, swimming hard toward the other shore. She's almost there when she hears him come up from the water, his arms splashing. He grabs her sides just as her feet touch the ground, and he drags her back and under the water. He's giving a sound of amusement when she comes up sputtering, and she whips an arm out of the water, sending a wave over her shoulder.

He coughs, and she laughs as he spins her toward him. He looks nothing short of devious, his eyes shining like the stones again, and she quickly wraps her legs around him. She reaches out to push his hair back, and some emotion flickers across his face to replace his plotting expression.

"Now you can't drown me without drowning yourself." She grins in triumph, dropping her arms around his neck and pressing against him.

"You got it in my mouth." He glares at her harder when she laughs. "You're severely underestimating my need for retribution."

"You're willing to put yourself under just to put me under?"

"You haven't left me with a choice." One of his hands leaves her side to travel the length of her spine, his arm wrapping around her waist.

"Well, at least you won't be able to drown me. I'm attached to your self preservation now."

"Sure about that?" His eyebrow hikes, and as soon as she opens her mouth to respond, she's back under the water. He pulls them back up when her lungs start to burn, and she releases the death grip she had on his neck.

"Slippers, Malfoy, slippers!" They're back under then, and he might be laughing or the bubbles are just from her, forming from her lips and rolling against their faces.

They resurface a lot quicker than they did the first time, panting, and he sneers at her triumphant look. "The moment you let go, Granger...watch out."

"It's a good thing I'm not letting go then. Not until you have to carry me back to the house. I don't want to hurt my poor feet, you know."

He huffs, but if he really wanted to, he could untangle her from around him, and she wouldn't fight that hard to stay if he was so adamant about her not. Instead, his arm slips further around her back until his fingers wrap around her hip, and his other hand pushes the hem of her dress up her thigh. Her fingers dance through the wet locks of hair at his nape, and he breathes against her mouth before kissing her until she's hot all over again.

Day: 1507; Hour: 8

She is contemplating the heights to both sides of her smaller frame when she notices his shoulders pulling back, his spine straightening, and his chin lifting. Draco looks almost robotic, he's so stiff, but his face looks strained for three paces before it's blank. She looks ahead of them, realization catching up with her nerves, and Vincent Crabbe freezing at the other end of the corridor.

The two Aurors at either side of him tug him forward, hard enough for him to trip over his feet. The vicious look remains on his face despite it, his eyes wild with rage and that glint of madness she knows as he eyes Draco. Hermione tries to school neutrality on her face, but her heart picks up speed and Anthony huffs a laugh at her other side. The last time she can remember seeing Crabbe had been at Hogwarts, laughing with a smirking Draco, both their arms wrapped around Pansy's shoulders as they sauntered through the dungeon.

She holds her breath as they near one another, and lets it out in a hiss when Crabbe rears back and spits at Draco. The blond pulls short, his body rigid and frozen before he lowers his head to look at the glob on his shoe. Crabbe tries to spit again, but he's jerked back at the same time, stumbling over his feet as the saliva slides down his chin. Hermione is stuck between grabbing hold of Draco or letting it play out, but even though she's so *sure* Draco will snap, he doesn't move.

"You have some spittle on your face, Vince."

"Fuck *you*. You're lucky I'm in these binds, you fucking trait--"

"You're the one who's lucky," Draco hisses, stepping forward, and the two Aurors look away. "I should make you lick my *fucking boots clean*. Azkaban will break you slower, though, and I rather you--"

"*Who are you*? Who the fuck are you? You were my-- You left us! You left the Dark

Lord, you left your parents, you left *us*! Millie cried for days, Blaise almost-- You *abandoned* us to go save worthless, dirty *creatures*. If there weren't so many blood traitors, the Mudbloods would have lost by now! If--"

"You've always been so delusional, Vince. You've never had a single independent thou--"

"--we always followed! You were supposed to *be there*, and then the second we needed you the mo--"

"--a puppet! I didn't have the *time*, and you never had the fucking brain cells! I don't have to explain--"

"--always, since we were six years old, hexing Pansy's ugly 'Mudblood' dolls, and our fathers would--"

"--get it. You're not *worth* a moment of my *life* for what you've done--"

"For what I've *done*?" Crabbe practically roars, struggling again against the hands holding him back. "You killed Greg! You killed Greg, and I *saw* you! For nothing! For that worthless sack of shit, that fucking Longbottom fuck! You. Killed. *Greg*."

"I had no choice!" Draco yells.

"You had the choice! You made it when you *left us*! I don't even *know* you! I don't want to! You killed *Greg*, right in front of my *face*, for *Longbottom*. But I took care of that, didn't I? The look on your face, Dray," Crabbe laughs out, a dirty, dirty sound. "The look on your face when I killed him! And then you looked at me like I *betrayed you*, but you would have killed *me* if it hadn't been--"

Hermione hadn't even been aware that she moved. Her mind had spun with information until it registered. Until *when I killed him* finally hit her like a Bludger to the chest. She had been distantly aware of her hearing buzzing out, adrenaline infusing her blood, and of the cold wave of emotion in her stomach. Then suddenly she had Anthony's arms around her, his hand yanking at the wand clutched in her own, and she was throwing herself forward violently in an attempt to reach Crabbe.

"This isn't a battle, Hermione," Anthony rushes letters into her ear. "This would be murder. It'll be murder."

He killed Neville. He had *killed Neville*. This man, with this familiar face that she

doesn't really know at all, had been the one to *take Neville's life away*. Had taken him *from her*. All she feels is rage -- the grief, and regret, and all other emotions washed white and gone inside of her. She feels like she did when Seamus died, when revenge became such a solid mass of ugly that it left her raw and uncontrollable. There is nothing in the world now but Crabbe's face and Neville's memory, and her own unblinking fury.

She has to get him. She has to shove his face into mud, to break his bones, and tear him apart. She has to ram her fist into his face, her foot into his spine. She has to make him cry, and bleed, and beg for a salvation she would not give. She has to make him *pay* for what he's done, and what he's *stolen*. She has to make him sob worthless apologies for the fact that no matter what she does to him, it will never bring Neville back. She will never be able to trade his worthless life for the life of her friend.

And it's so *wrong*. It's so screwed up that he *stands* here, with breath, movement, emotions, *life*. That he can stand there and be alive *at all*. He has no right to breath. He has no right to stand there and be angry over his life, when he has it at all. He doesn't deserve it. He doesn't deserve what he took from Neville, what he *laughs* about taking from them all. So she'll break him. She'll break him until he begs for her to end it. She'll watch him suffer until it makes it go away. Until it somehow *rectifies* it all. So Neville knows she didn't let him off easy. That she did to him what he had done to Neville, what he had done to her insides.

Anthony is still holding her back when three Aurors pry Draco off of Crabbe. Crabbe is jerked to his feet, his nose broken and blood filling up the holes where his two front teeth had been. But it's not enough, it's not enough, it'snotenough.

Day: 1507; Hour: 19

She pulls her knickers and jeans up, and they catch and drag in the sticky sweat on her skin. The fabric sticks to her legs and thighs, uncomfortable and damp, and sweat beads down her spine as she buttons her trousers. She had had to pee so badly she was walking crooked in her attempt to press her thighs together. The pressure was so demanding she feared her body would take over her head, and the thought of fighting as her jeans chaffed through sweat and urine had her heading into the woods before she even finished telling them she had to go.

Kara, or Klara, had followed behind her, and it took several awkward seconds before Hermione knew the woman didn't plan on moving from her spot in front of her. Between the stranger scanning the woods around her, her bare bum shining white toward the team, her hoping they didn't see it, and the threat of Death Eaters,

it was the most awkward loo break of her life.

"Thanks," Hermione breathes, because she isn't sure what else to say to someone who watched her back while she took a squat.

Kara shrugs, falling in line as they navigated the bushes and trees. It is a little unnerving when they emerge from the shadows to seven wands aimed at them. They drop quickly, but Kara still raises her hands, her fingers pulled into peace signs. Draco raises an eyebrow, pushing the sweat-dampened strands of hair out of his eyes, his bruised knuckles black on ivory, and she can just make it out from the darkness within his hood. *Done*? She keeps walking as an answer.

The group of them reminds her of a rising and falling wave as they hold their formation over large roots and small hills, only breaking to wound around trees before coming back together again. There's half of a moon in the sky overhead, and they move through patterns of eerie blue and complete darkness. The forest is alive around them, but nothing moves as close as an enemy, and there isn't any flashes in the dark yet. Hermione still feels them like they could be anyone, though, because this is the way she has learned how to survive.

There is no pause in step when Draco raises his hand into a beam of moonlight, and Hermione automatically breaks left with a man named Fin - a nickname, she has been told, *because he's the warning before the enemy never comes up again*. Hermione doesn't know if that's because he's clumsy, or only dangerous for the enemy, but she guesses the latter when the large mass of him picks through the forest as silently as a pixie.

Hermione's feet squelch in sweat within the confines of her boots, and her hair feels like a hot, damp towel wrapped about her head to keep all the heat inside her blood. Her skin is prickling and itchy, and when she scratches her arm, layers of perspiration form under her uneven fingernails. She feels a tingle that she almost passes off as a gifted breeze until Fin mutters a curse. He stops and half-turns on a step back, and his foot cracks wood as the moon catches his wide eyes. Her heart thumps hard twice, and her inhale is slow and heavy.

"The anti-Apparition wards are already up," he whispers so lowly that she thinks he said something completely different at first.

"Someone else did it."

"It was my job."

She thinks to tell him that it doesn't mean someone on their team didn't do it, and that Draco is more than capable if he thought it was taking too long, but Fin's look gives her pause. She is used to seeing the wild looks of people in war as if they are an animal who has been spotted as prey, but Fin's look is more of the hunter who has spotted the prey and is now running out of time.

He starts moving to the side where Kara and Dunfley should be next to them, his walk no longer silent but crunching and rustling. They're supposed to be circling left in an angle that will bring them to the back of the house, and the plan is riding on everyone doing what everyone is supposed to do. Hermione feels like she is attached to the back of an unstoppable car heading for collision when she follows him, unknowing of when or how they'll crash, or if she'll walk away. All she knows is that she isn't going to leave him to the dark alone, and there's no way she can drag him in the direction they need to be going.

"Fin," she whispers, and he stops, but it's only because Kara and Dunfley aren't anywhere to be found. "Fin, we have--"

Something cold flashes across her nape, and then it's burning heat that grows sharper, sharper. Hermione's head whips to the side in time to catch a jet of purple in the moonlight as she slaps a hand to the back of her neck, and the spell slices across her cheek, cold and then fiercely hot. Her neck is soaked with far more than sweat could have managed, and the heat pulses in time with the liquid that seeps through the cracks between her fingers.

She drops to her knees to avoid the next spell flying at her, and casts a Stunner into the woods. It's coming from behind them, so they either have terrible timing, or the Death Eaters had somehow known. She remembers the anti-Apparition wards as Fin's massive hand hauls her to her feet, her heart pounding at the base of her throat, and thinks, *theyknowtheyknow*. Fin shoves her hard enough to make her stumble back and slam into a tree, and his Killing Curse makes everything around them glow green.

"Go tell them!" he growls before running through the trees, a spell hitting the ground in front of her feet and kicking up clumps of dirt onto her jeans.

She wavers, tilting left and right to follow him or find the others, but it's the Killing Curse that hits five trees away that makes up her mind. All she can see is Draco lit in green, his face frozen in surprise as he falls into the depth of night, and then her feet are hitting the ground even faster than the slamming of her heart.

Sweat slides into the open wounds in her cheek and neck, making them burn so

badly that she feels as if her head is on fire over and under the skin. She swipes an arm across her eyes and forehead to prevent the drops from blinding her, and almost misses the slant of black at the edge of a moonbeam. The figure is paused and cloaked in a black robe like all the members of her team, and she can't see the face to find a mask or skin. She might have missed it entirely had it not been moving before, but she can see where the arms must be, devoid of any ribbon of color.

She casts to Petrify the figure, the spell hitting hard enough to knock them out of the light. She aims a Binding Spell into the place where she guesses they fell, just in case, and the distraction causes her to bang her shoulder off a tree trunk. It throws her back crookedly, and she hits the ground on her hip with a squeak.

She sucks in a breath, thick and humid down the dry passage of her throat, and it leaves her shuddering. She can hear yelling from up ahead now, distant but rumbling like thunder, and she knows she's too late. She rushes to her feet, ducking around the tree, and sails down a hill so quickly that she isn't sure if she's going to tumble head first until she hits the bottom on both feet.

The momentum sends her out of the woods and into the clearing around a rickety, tall house before she's even fully prepared, her wand just raising in time to rebound the spell darting at her. It flies back to one of the three people rushing at her, and Hermione flings herself to the right to avoid the Killing Curse as she yells out a Stunner. If they get any closer, she's not going to be able to dodge it like that, and it's this thought that causes her to cast her own.

The green puffs like vapor from the end of her wand, and she sucks in a breath, her heart jolting. *That worthless sack of shit...when I killed him, when I killedhimwhenIkilledhim*.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" she cries, and it explodes from her wand like the feeling does in her chest.

The man next to the one the spell hits roars out his rage, and Hermione has to throw herself to the ground on her stomach to miss the two flashes of green aimed at her. She jerks her wand back with the spell she casts, wiping one of them off their feet before rolling to avoid the next two lines of green.

Hermione staggers to stand, nearly losing balance as she Stuns the man on the ground. Blue jets through her hair, singeing the curls, and pain erupts in her earlobe as her hearing buzzes out on the left. For two rapid beats of her heart, she suspects the gold light and sound to be part of whatever hit her, but then she spots the wave of fire arcing across the sky just a moment before the entire house is lit with it.

Her heart stops long enough for her whole body to feel numb, and her block is clumsy, forcing her to jump to the side to dodge the spell when it breaks through her shield. She prays that no one is in the house, that they all got out, that they're currently jumping through windows and onto ground that is hard but not low enough to be unforgiving. She hopes Draco isn't doing anything stupid.

The Death Eater in front of her has removed her mask, and if Hermione's fear wasn't so concentrated on where her team is, she might be afraid of the way blood is coating the young girl's face. It's streaming from her eyes and nose, and when she casts, a red vapor follows her words into the air. With the orange glow and flames lashing behind her, she looks like she has risen from hell with all its fury.

It must be from whatever spell Hermione had rebounded when she first emerged from the woods, but there's no time to think of the could-haves, and only enough to recognize the capability. She rebounds the yellow light, and the girl throws up a shield, but it doesn't last long enough to block Hermione's Stunner as well. The Death Eater flies back, hitting the ground, and dragging for another foot as Hermione runs forward.

Her feet skid across the ground as she comes to a stop. The flames tearing through the house are sweltering so much heat onto her that she feels like her skin will start melting soon; like the fire is going to peel it back from her meat and sinew, and it'll slip through all the sweat until she's a pile of naked bones. But she knows simply and honestly that if she rounds this house and doesn't find them, she'll be heading inside no matter the cost of her skin. She can't even catch her breath, and her eyes are burning everything into starry, liquid shapes as she searches for the Death Eaters' wands.

She's frantic with her need to see that everyone is all right, and she misses spotting the wand near a hip until her third time looking in that exact spot. She pauses at the fold of paper, then rips it from the pocket of the Stunned man, cramming it against the bottom of her own. The three Death Eaters had been running for the woods instead of staying to fight, so they might have been scared, or trying to protect--

Hermione jumps back at the large figure running for the woods, and her wand hand hesitates before she hexes the ground in front of their feet. They turn towards her, as she had wanted them to do, and she lowers her wand when she sees Fin's face. If it hadn't been for the distance between them, whatever spell he cast at her would have hit without her wand so much as twitching at her side. Even when she throws up the blocking spell, it's due to instinct over any real belief that he isn't just casting at something behind her.

It does not hit an unseen enemy, however, and instead hits her shield hard enough for the explosion of his magic against the power of her own to send her onto her back. Her spell ends with the impact, and his sails over her sprawled body like a comet in the starless sky above her. Hermione gasps back in the breath that left her, her mind spinning with thoughts she can't quite catch as she leaps to her feet in time for another curse. Her feet are planted firmly, but when his spell hits her block, the heels of her boots scrape back deeply enough through the dirt to leave grooves. She has to grab the wrist of her wand hand to straighten the shaking, and she grits her teeth until his spell relents.

"What are you doing?" she screams, but he ignores her, his expression wrinkled with anger.

She yells through her teeth when his spell hits her block again, as if the sound can build strength into the strained muscles of her arm and swirl of magic in her blood. It ends so suddenly that she stumbles, one arm flying out for balance while the other drops leaden to her side. She forces it back up again, trying to blink her way to a clearer vision as sweat rolls down her entire body and continues soaking through her clothes.

It's only Draco, though, scowling as he strides towards her, and she can't deny the jolt of her heart at seeing him untouched by green or flames. Kara is behind him but still, her wand trained on Hermione, and Hermione feels as if she has stepped into another world.

"Drop your wand."

Her eyes widen as Kara takes three steps towards her, nodding the box of her chin as fire-lit eyes glance to Hermione's hand. "He attacked me, in case you didn't notice that I was only using blocking spells."

"They've all Apparated out, then," Dunfley says, walking past her to study the edge of the trees.

Draco's eyes scan the gash in her cheek as he moves around the bodies to put his back to the fire, but he doesn't say anything. His gaze makes her more aware of how she looks like she just dived into a pool of sweat and then rolled in dirt, but his own skin is gleaming, and his hair is yellow with wetness. His robe is torn near the bend of his elbow, and his hand is coated in blood, but he doesn't look pained when he grabs a fallen wand with it.

"Fin wouldn't turn traitor if he was being tortured to death for information on the

location of Ministry toilets, let alone to set us up. Now drop y--"

"*If* he's not the traitor, it's only because he thinks I am due to… I couldn't see his band, he was running in the other direction, so I threw a hex in front of him to make him turn. But it was obviously not aimed at his person!"

"Who did that?" Kara asks, nodding towards the bodies.

"I did," Hermione snaps, because being accused as a traitor is one of the easiest ways to set her blood boiling. Draco stands, glancing back again when he catches her glare, and she doesn't have to say anything for his scowl to deepen.

"It's Hermione Granger, Kara," Pluckinson says, and Kara snorts, but her wand drops - probably because no one else had rallied with her, rather than her actually believing Hermione.

"I'm taking off your Stunner, Malfoy."

Draco appears too busy with a muttered conversation with Henley to pay Kara any attention. Hermione watches the other woman hesitate for several seconds before finally lifting the spell from Fin. Hermione clenches her wand a little tighter, just in case, but Fin doesn't even look at her when he shoves himself to his feet.

"They were communicating," Henley says. "All of them are wearing these rings." He looks up to the woods, and then glances back at the burning house. "They must have had a watch group, and then sent word through the rings when they saw us."

"It makes more sense than accusing Fin."

"Or me," Hermione shoots back, but Kara keeps her glare leveled on Draco.

"I didn't get the ones who ran off, unless that's them," Fin says, and Hermione remembers the wad of folded paper in her pocket.

"It looks like them. What the hell happened to her face?"

"This one's dead."

"There's only four of them," Hermione says, opening the top of each fold enough to recognize the design of a map.

"Three… Oh."

"Which one was carrying them?" Henley asks.

Draco holds his hand out, and she hesitates before handing them over. Perhaps to be petty enough to not give them to him when he hadn't bothered to say a word for her before. Not that she needs him to defend her, but it still bothers her that he had been silent while a stranger was the first to point out the unlikelihood. She also wants to know what the maps are to and for, but she knows she's not allowed to see them. She's not even sure if *any* of them are allowed to *really* see them.

"The one on the right."

"Stunned. Perfect."

Hermione glances up at Henley, and then over to the legs of the Death Eater Jacob is searching, who they would not prepare for transport like the other two, because their side had carried enough of their own dead to worry about carrying the Dark's. Fin is lifting the girl with the bloodied face, and Hermione wonders if she ever might pass that girl in a Ministry corridor one day, and if her phlegm might slide the slopes of Hermione's boot tip.

"Granger."

She looks up at Draco, surprised with the sudden break of her thoughts, and then looks down at the two-sided bottle opener serving as a Portkey.

"They'll want to interview you."

She slides a finger through the loop as he quickly draws the fabric away from under it, and then slides one of his fingers through the other end. She takes a deep breath, closing her eyes to the grey and gold, and the world spins, spins, and spins.

Day: 1508; Hour: 20

She refolds the letter from Lupin, smoothing the edges between her fingers. The Wizarding Ministry had come to an agreement with the Muggle Ministry over her…car theft. Thankfully, because it was crucial to the success of the mission, she had been forgiven. Unfortunately, she would have to repay the Muggle Ministry for the reimbursement they gave the woman due to interior damage. Like some mud really hurt her car or something. Hermione would like to inform them she'll pay it as soon as she gets her next paycheck, in a year or ten.

"What is that shit?"

Hermione drops her hand from pinching the bridge of her nose, and smiles at the look on Draco's face. "It's called rap."

"Is it a form of Muggle torture? If he says 'birthday sex' one more time, I'm going to go mad."

Hermione huffs a laugh and shrugs, tilting into him as the cushions sink under his weight. "Anthony loves it. It's good to dance to, I guess."

"How, exactly, do you dance to this? I can't see couples sweeping across the ballroom to words like 'shake that ass' or--"

Hermione laughs - really laughs. Full out, eyes shut, head back laugh. There is something remarkably funny about those lyrics in Draco's bored drawl, coupled with the images of rich purebloods in their formal wear, dancing to rap music.

Draco's grinning lopsidedly at her when she opens her eyes, and she's overwhelmed with the desire to kiss him, but she doesn't. "We're going to have to search for a music channel on the television next time. You have to see for yourself."

"Show me."

"What? No."

"Granger, if it's that funny, I want to see it."

"It's not really *funny*, though I assure you it would be embarrassing and hilarious if I attempted it. Which I'm not going to, by the way."

"Why not?"

"I don't dance."

"Bullocks. I saw you at the Yule Ball."

"I mean, I don't dance *like that*." She briefly entertains the idea of dancing with him, but dismisses it. She would probably make a fool of herself, or burst out laughing if he tried to do it himself.

He gives her an annoyed look, but is cut off from replying by a slamming sound. They both look toward Anthony's door, tense, until a female moan sounds against the wood. Hermione blinks and turns her head forward again, Draco shifting and

leaning back into the couch. She doesn't think it will ever stop being awkward to hear people having sex, no matter how many times she's had it herself.

"Why didn't you tell me it was Crabbe?" And there are a dozen other ways she could have drawn their attention away from the banging, but it's the first thing that comes out.

Draco's shoulders raise in what could have been a slow shrug or a long inhale, and he rolls his head along his shoulders. His neck cracks loudly in the room, and his eyes settle on her. "Does it matter?"

"Maybe not." Because knowing who it had been wouldn't have changed what it was. "How did…?"

She can't finish the question, and maybe Draco understands why, because he knows what she's asking. "Avada. It was quick."

He's lying, or at least she thinks he is. Harry had mentioned that Neville's casket had been closed at the viewing. Perhaps it had been his grandmother's wishes, or Neville's, but it was likely the state of the body. She isn't sure if she even wants to know, afraid of the images that would accompany it, so she doesn't press him. Instead, she looks down from his solid look, like he wasn't going to budge on that answer, and she's more thankful for that than she should be for having asked in the first place.

"I wanted to kill him," she whispers, confesses with something like shame as she stares at her wringing hands. "I've never really *hated* anyone. Hate is such a common place word, it felt even beyond that. There was this moment, with Seamus…after he died, but the person who killed him was already dead. It felt like that, though, maybe worse, when I looked at Crabbe."

She makes wrinkles at the bottom of her shirt with her nervous hands, and she can feel him staring at her. "It's not like hating him is unjustified, Granger."

"I know. But it wasn't a battle. It wasn't hating him and trying to defend myself. He was in the middle of the Ministry and in binds. I didn't care if he couldn't defend himself. I wanted to do…a lot of very bad things. I still do. I was so overcome with these…dark things inside of me, this fury and hatred, that I couldn't think of anything else."

"He killed Longbottom. It doesn't matter if he was defenseless at that moment. He's still a Death Eater, and he still did it without care. It doesn't matter if we're in a

battle or not."

"Doesn't it, though? Shouldn't there be a line, Draco? Between killing people in self-defense, and killing them because you hate them? Death Eaters kill people because they hate them. Not us. Not me. That's not supposed to be me. I'm supposed to believe in the legal system. I always have. Crabbe will get Azkaban--"

"And the Kiss."

"Yes. He'll pay, and I know that, but I didn't care right then. I felt like *I* had to do it...I *wanted* to. I never felt so much hate before...still. That scares me. I know he'll pay with his soul later, but... There's a darkness that comes into us when we cast that Curse. I've been able to justify it because it's what I need to do to survive. But that would have just been revenge, and hate, and... It scares me how quickly that darkness took control...over everything."

They fall into silence. The thumping against the door has stopped, though the music keeps blaring. She wonders why she confessed these things to Draco, but she has a habit of doing so. He's never judged her for it. Maybe it's his past, the things he's done, but he's never looked surprised or made her feel ashamed.

She raises her eyes to him when he clears his throat, but he's staring at the black sheet of night covering the window. "There are few human beings in the world who could look at a person that killed someone they care for and not want to do the same to them. It's part of our humanity, not a formed evil. Trying to kill people when it's not survival, or when the hatred is not justified, is evil. The darkness you felt wasn't something created by your means of self-defense, Granger. It's what *they* created."

"But I--"

"There aren't any 'buts'. I would have thought you fucked up if you *hadn't* felt that way. You don't want to kill every Death Eater you see because they are a Death Eater and you hate them. If they saw you, in a battle or not, they would torture and kill you without thought. You want someone to die to pay for killing a friend? That's not evil. That doesn't make you a bad person. It makes you normal."

"By now, though, nearly everyone in the war, on both sides, have lost someone they care about because of the other side. So, doesn't that make all hate jus--"

"Death Eaters," Draco turns to her now, pointing a finger out the window, agitated, "will go and kill a Muggle for the fuck of it. That doesn't justify them for anything. None of them are killing us in self-defense, Granger. None of them are

killing us because we killed someone they love. It's only an added reasoning to them. They're killing us for blood. For dirty blood, or blood traitors, all for *blood*. We aren't *anything* like them, no matter how much we want to see them dead."

"I know that. I jus--"

"Good."

"--felt like that outside of a mission, and it freaked me out a little. In retrospect. I just don't like to lose such control over myself." He raises an eyebrow at her, and she rushes on. "Like that."

His other eyebrow raises now, and when he smirks, she realizes that the look he had given her had nothing to do with sex like she had thought. He opens his mouth, but whatever she had been hoping he would say was lost when Ron walked into the room. He barely looks at her, though she smiles at him, and he looks at the scant space between her and Draco. She looks at the blond when Ron stares at him longer than five seconds, and finds Draco glaring right back at him.

"Hey, Ron." She smiles again, trying to break the tension he brought with him. She has to remind herself that Ron isn't used to seeing Draco around. The two had worked with one another at least twice, as far as she knew, but that was hardly enough time to be civil. She and Draco had still hated one another at that point.

Ron doesn't take his disgusted look off Draco when he answers her. "Harry wanted me to tell you that there's a session next week, if you want to go."

"Oh." The last 'session' had ended about the same time their argument had, so they hadn't really had one. She had promised Harry she would try it, so she doesn't really have a choice on going if she didn't have a mission. "Are you going?"

Ron finally looks away from Draco and to her, but his only response is to walk out of the room. She stands to follow him, smoothing her hands over her wrinkled shirt. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Ron's door is locked and he doesn't answer when she knocks. By the time she walks back to the living room, Draco is gone.

Thirty-Seven

Day: 1512; Hour: 22

There aren't any lines in the world. There is rarely something that is starkly *this* and *that*. The world is full of colors, and on either end is white and black. But it isn't *pure* white and *absolute* black. There is nothing that is so good it's never done anything bad, and even the evilest of people have experienced something good - even if it's only love for their own self, it's still love, and Hermione has never been the sort of person to spell it backwards.

Between all these colors, this kaleidoscope of humanity and lives, there are still no lines. There are just spaces were the two colors blend, forming shades and other colors entirely. A person can go their whole lives roaming back and forth across the spectrum, or maybe staying in one spot, but nothing is easily defined. It's about principles, and the things we are taught, and the things we learn. It's about dropping off a cliff, trying to fly, and never knowing what color you land in.

Because it's about perception too. Hermione sees herself in shades of red, after pink, after white, because she has done bad things, but she is a good person. Some people see her in white. Death Eaters see her in black, or brown, in mud and dirt, dirty blood. She sees them in the almost-black too, just as clearly as they see themselves in the off-white, and she wonders at that. She thinks about it a lot. Perception. And she wonders how they all got here, in their color fields.

Maybe it was a circle. A long, arching circle, where the first Muggle-born hated some pure-blood because he looked at her weird. Maybe she spit on his shoe, and so he went and told his friends, and they all hated her. They watched her in their world, watched her have to learn the things they were born knowing, and they called her stupid. Then maybe she got top marks, or learned those things very quickly, and maybe took someone's job, and people got scared. So they told their children, *watch out for those Muggle bloods. Their blood isn't pure, they're dirty*. Then more came, and more became scared, and they thought, *why are these people stealing our jobs? Handling our money? Making laws in our government? Why are these dirty bloods, these Mudbloods, why are they even here? They shouldn't even* be *here*.

Then it spread. It spread and spread for generations, until the lies got thick, and the misconceptions were brutal, the perceptions became principles, and people really *hated*. People decided they wanted them gone, and they would kill them to do

it, because it was the only sort of sense they've known since birth. Because eight generations ago, their great-grandfather had his shoe spit on. So then the colors expand, and there is a war, and people die, and then there is another war. Then a lot of crazy things happen, because people have to prove the worth of their life by taking other people's, and now *everyone* is scared.

It comes around the circle, and all of them are dirty now. Nothing is definable, because Death Eaters were formed by a half-blood, and in the heart that sometimes beats under her dirty-blooded ear is pure, pure blood. It comes around the circle because Blaise Zabini's pure blood is mixed with his saliva on the top of her shoe, and when she looks up, it is the one whose great-grandfather might have started it all. He's lowering his wand, and his shoulders are shaking, and all around them the colors stream.

He grabs her arm, yelling something about the meet-up point, and tugs her behind him as they run. She tugs back, and when he turns, she kisses him. Quickly, because it's not the time, but she thinks it might be the exact time he needs for her to do it. He just killed one of his old best friends, months after he had killed another, and sometimes she forgets how much harder this can be for him. Sometimes she remembers the horror-shock burning his face when he doesn't think anyone is watching.

His lips taste like sweat, and his hand is dirty when he drops her arm and presses his palm into hers. His fingers wrap tight, squeezing her hand, and then they are running again, out across the color field.

Day: 1513; Hour: 10

Ernie's fingers dance into some melody or painting in the air, and he sways to the hum and shuffle of feet around him. His lips are moving so quickly she can't tell if they are trembling or if he's ranting. His skin is pale, purple smudges under his eyes and around his wrists, and he looks frail.

"We thought he was a deserter," Harry muttered, scratching at three days of a beard on his face.

"Why?"

"His belongings left when he did."

"What happened to him?"

Harry pauses for a moment, and gestures toward the door. "I think it's kind of obvious."

"I mean, how did he become insane, Harry?" Hermione sounds snippy, but she can't help it.

"I dunno. Do I look like I carry a fact sheet for everyone?" Harry is snippy as well, and he runs his fingers through his ruffled hair with a sigh.

Their session hadn't gone as well as he hoped. The first twenty minutes went far better than Hermione could have thought, but then the accusation laced questions came. *Have you ever thought that your obsession to fight alongside Harry, to possibly die alongside him, stems from an obsession* with *Harry?* And maybe that's what it looked like, maybe it was good to ask in case it might be truth, but it never had been. You follow a man to his house when you're obsessed. Love, you follow them to war. Hermione thought there had to be a difference in there, even if it didn't always look like it. Obsession implied something *other*, when she was desperately clinging onto what was real.

"Come on. We have to get to Headquarters."

"Can we Floo to the Burrow first? I don't want to deal with..." she trails off, waving her hand, but he knows what she means. The lines of press, the obnoxious yelling, the flashes, the shouted questions.

"I don't know if Molly or Arthur ever cleared me to enter their Floo." He takes his glasses off, rubbing them clean on the edge of his shirt. "You can go, though. I'll meet up with you at Headquarters."

"No, we'll just Apparate." If Harry had to deal with the press, she would deal with them as well. She also didn't know if she could escape Molly's disapproving look-over of her body and the food she would shove her way. Professor McGonagall has never been understanding of lateness.

With one last long look at Ernie and a nudge from Harry, she grabs the handle of her heavy trunk and drags it after her.

Day: 1514; Hour: 0

She finishes knotting Draco's old Slytherin tie around her neck, and stares at her reflection. She stares really hard, until the back of her eyes hurt and they water, and she stares some more.

Day: 1515; Hour: 12

Hermione blinks slowly at the shelves in front of her, and then turns toward the Healer. "Is this the only supply room?"

The Healer's smile is a little sad and a lot bitter. "Indeed."

"The Ministry is going to hate this list," Hermione mutters, looking at the flaps of labels and writing down every potion name.

"They aren't going to supply us everything. You need to put everything in order of importance. Forget everything that isn't an absolute necessity. We need healing balms for internal injuries, pain-relief potions, sleeping draughts-"

"Sleeping draughts are necessary?"

"We've taken to using them for…peaceful transitions. It takes too much of the pain-relief potions to use that option."

"Peace-- Oh," she whispers, getting it now. "I see."

"The Ministry, Mungo's, and the Order have been stripped down to what is absolutely necessary the past several months. Stock ingredients have dwindled, the rarer stuff is nearly impossible to find. Public suppliers are under law to give a certain portion to the Ministry, but most shops have closed down, and there aren't many people growing or harvesting what we need. Private suppliers, and what the Ministry can't rightfully take from the shops, have inflated prices due to demand and a lack of everything. We can hardly afford it."

Hermione understands this. It has been something like this since months into the war. She had seen an increase in supplies after Draco and Pansy turned themselves in, again when the Ministry passed that law, and once in a while when the Ministry seized a Death Eater's vault. Mostly, they were always low or running low. There was hardly ever enough of anything: potions, battle equipment, food, hospital beds, mission team members. Hermione has learned to deal with it. Fighting raw, Neville used to say.

She takes a breath, and crossed out what she wrote down instead of using a new sheet, because parchment is getting harder to come by as well. "Tell me what you want."

Day: 1518; Hour: 18

Harry blushes down at his birthday cake, lowering his eyes as they continue to sing and Molly dabs at her tears. There is a long silence when they finish the song, and Harry inhales deeply, making his wish as he blows out his candles. His eyes dance and he grins madly at them through the smoke, and promptly sends a piece of cake flying into Hermione's face.

War had made them agile, quick, and inventive, with exceptional aim. The cake never stood a chance.

Day: 1520; Hour: 13

It happens as she's about to turn the corner. She had been thinking of the safe Draco was hoisting back into his slipping grip, annoyed because she had been sent with him to help carry it and he was still refusing. She had been thinking about the rain soaking through to her bones and blurring her vision. She had been thinking about the wretched purple color of the fabric over the safe, hiding what it was from the Muggle passersby. She had been thinking of the plastic bag in her hands, with shingles and plaster, and other things Harry hadn't told her the reason for.

Then she had seen the black blob out of the corner of her eye, the pointed hood, and she reacts before all her thoughts are even out of her head. Her feet slosh in the puddles, kicking water up at herself and the woman next to her, and she's yelling a spell the second her vision meets the figure over the line of her wand. The woman next to her and the two business men down the street freeze, and then there is a large bang and splash behind her.

Hermione releases her breath and Obliviates the woman as she trips over the pavement in her bid to escape, and then the business man who had began to run away. Draco is oddly silent behind her as she aims her wand at the other man, still frozen in surprise, and calmly tells them all the fallen man had tripped and that they all had a very important errand in the other direction.

She looks over her shoulder as the witnesses start walking away from them, dazed, and finds him staring back at her. She opens her mouth to ask him what's wrong, but the intensity of his gaze has rain water hitting her silent tongue. She had expected him to start roaming the area for other Death Eaters, but instead he is standing completely still, looking at her as if he's trying to name the correct hue to every speck of color in her eyes.

He moves, finally, once all her bones are locked up too, and reaches forward. He pushes her wand down slowly, his eyes still trained on hers, and she looks to her lowering hand and then at the…man. The man, with no mask, wearing jeans under

his coat, and his bag of groceries spilled out over the pavement. She blinks slowly at him, three times, and her breath comes in short little puffs. She had thought *for sure* that he had been a Death Eater. She had seen the hood, and the glint of a mask, and she had *known*.

She doesn't realize that Draco has moved until he's in front of her, looking at her for another long moment as if to make sure she isn't about to break down or *Stupefy* someone else. He turns his back, moving forward to the man, and crouching down to *Ennervate* him. Hermione stares, still in shock, as Draco starts talking to him and helps to collect his groceries.

It's because of the rain, that's all. The rain, and her annoyance, and her busy thoughts. She can't *see* properly through all this *rain*. He *had* been wearing a long, dark, hooded jacket. It was hardly her fault for reacting-- Thank God, she had only Stunned him. *Thank God, thank God, thank God* she had only done that.

Draco is taking her wand out of her hand and she blinks away the haze over her eyes to see him fully. She curls her hands into fists that tremble, and her breath is catching in her throat, and there's a winding of tension in her chest. He pulls her rain jacket open and slides her wand into the holster, and then he starts to button her up. He buttons it to block her wand inside, to keep her from pulling it out, she thinks. Normally, he wouldn't ever do that, because none of them did. They needed to have access to their wand as quickly as possible. Normally, she would have asked him what the hell he was doing. But now... It was just the rain. *It was just because of the rain*.

"I...I just thought..."

"It's normal, Granger," he says lowly, his voice almost lost within the beating of raindrops.

"Normal?" she whispers back, and he may not have heard her, staring down at his fingers pushing the buttons through the slots. His fingers are probably numb - hers are.

"There was a bloke in Diagon the other day...started hexing and Stunning everyone on the street. He said all he saw were Death Eaters. This happens." He glances up at her, all grey and white, and she thinks he should disappear into everything around them, but he doesn't. "No one will know."

"Not to me. This doesn't happen to me."

He pauses for awhile, eyeing the top button, the only one left undone. She hates that one, because it makes the fabric scratch her neck and it feels like it's about to choke her. She doesn't protest when he reaches forward to poke it through the slot though, his cold knuckles brushing her throat, and she doesn't know why.

"To everyone."

Day: 1520; Hour: 17

"Sitting here, just wasting time, waiting for the war to die..." Hermione must have heard this being sung from the living room for over a half hour. She is stuck between throwing her soup at them or begging for them to give up.

There were five of them, all young and fresh-faced, and she has no idea how they managed to get alcohol. They were lucky no older wizards, or more inclined witches, were in the house, or they would have been without it after the first sound of a cap popping off. Alcohol had become a rarity, along with everything else, and if given the opportunity, a lot of people would have called seniority or proven war-earned intimidation to take it for themselves.

"Your ugly toes sure are gross...but they're the ones that I love most," a girl sings to the clumsy strum of the boy's guitar.

"*What*? We're writing a war song!" And laughter fills the house. Hermione doesn't mind the sound of it, but when they start singing again, she's anxious for Draco to get back from dropping off the safe. He has a habit of walking into a room and making younger people scurry.

Day: 1520; Hour: 19

She catches sight of him in the dark of the hallway as she makes her way to the loo and she jumps, rainwater splashing out of the cup and down the leg of her pajamas. "Do you have to be such a creeper?"

"I was walking down a hallway. It's not my fault your eyesight is shit, Granger. You probably damage your eyes, reading all that small text so often." He sounds amused with her snappy tone, or maybe because she's squeezing the water out of her pants and back into the cup.

"Or by looking at your face."

"It's hard not to want to take in all the details." He's smirking, she knows.

"Of horridness, then promptly burn it from my memory forever."

"Granger, with how often you stare at me, you could probably paint my portrait with your eyes closed." Still smirking then, and she glances over to see him unbuttoning his coat. She rolls her eyes when he looks up at her.

"I could say the same for you, Malfoy."

He grins as he shrugs off his coat, because he knows she usually only says his surname when she's aggravated. "I would hope so. It would be a problem if I didn't know what I looked like by now."

"That's not what I meant."

"Really?" He knew it wasn't.

"Prat," she mutters, entering the bathroom, flicking on the light, and emptying the water into the sink. Sometimes the dark scares her, when she thinks about it too much.

"When did you get the Muggle beer?" He's in the doorway now, his shoulder perched against the frame, his coat and shirt balled up under his arm. The rain and wind is cold outside, but the house still remembers that it's summer, the heat trapped from the afternoon.

It's really completely unfair that he's standing there half-naked and dripping wet. His skin gleams in the yellow light of the bathroom, water dripping from his hair and onto his shoulders, curving with the lines of his chest. She eyes a drop as it rims around his bellybutton, his soaked trousers hanging low on his hips. His nipples are pebbled from the cold, and his hair is a mess from removing his t-shirt.

"It's not mine." She clears her throat, turning her attention back to the sink, and watches the water drain. The pipes are screwed up in the entire house, and she found the tub unplugged but full ten minutes into her shower. "Some new recruits are here. When it started raining, they set them up."

They had set the beer bottles up under the leaks in the living room, and used any other sort of container they could find for the rest. The whole house is a mess, really. She can't remember if she had been here before, but if she had, she didn't think it was this bad. When the rain had kicked back in a few hours after her arrival, she had thought the ceiling was going to collapse. There were at least forty leaks coming through. Added with the hard creaking from the wind, and the pounding of

rain that dulled all inside noise, she glanced at the ceiling in trepidation every few minutes.

Everything was water stained, and mold spots were scattered across the walls, interrupted by long, black streaks of water damage, peeling paint, and tearing wallpaper. The floorboards squeaked in protest with every step, and some spots were rather bouncy or completely rotted. There was a prevailing scent of mold and basement, the air damp and heavy. She understood why Harry had shoved some notes in her hand at Headquarters when he found out where she was going, and the shopping list that followed.

"I'm guessing there isn't a washer and dryer here?"

"Not that I found. I didn't go in the basement, though." She looks up at the ceiling and then at the floor, and he seems to know her fear of the house collapsing on her because he laughs.

He's in a good mood. It had actually taken her this long to realize it. Her day had been trying at best: arguing with a man over the proper paint, stunning a Muggle in the middle of the street because she had been *sure* it was a Death Eater, dragging herself through the rain, the annoying drunk people with their annoying guitar and annoying song, and then being stuck in a house bound to fall apart if they moved too much. It is a bad day. Not the worst day - so far removed from the worst day, that she feels stupid for even considering it a bad one. But it isn't exactly the best one, either, and she wonders why his has been different. She wants to know the reasons why he's smiling, and she wonders if it's for her. If she's the one he likes to share this with.

He's in a good mood though. Half naked, dripping wet, and laughing, and maybe her day isn't going to be so bad after all. There's a drop of water on his collarbone, the hollow of his throat, his stomach. More are trailing down his left nipple, the dip in the middle of his chest, into the hair below his bellybutton, along the line of his pelvis and into the low band of his trousers. But it's the one on the bridge of his nose that she touches, feeling it wet the pad of her finger as she follows the curve to the tip.

She watches him smile, the corner at the left coming up just a little higher than the right, and it's just for her. Only just for her. She brings her finger down, and his smile falls away as his lips part under her tracing finger. She follows down to his chin, over his throat, and his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows.

"You know, I watched some of that channel." His voice comes out low and deep,

and it momentarily distracts her from processing what he said.

"What channel?" She's too fascinated by the journey of her finger to wonder why he's not touching her back yet.

"The music one. For dancing."

She huffs a laugh, swirling a path to his left nipple. "What did you think?"

He's silent as she circles, and then rubs, and she wonders if they're playing that game again where she has to make him break. It hardly seems fair, since she has yet to make him do it to her. She's excited by the prospect, but she's already started touching and she doesn't really have a plan to stop. Later, soon.

She's at the other nipple when he speaks again, and his voice is a rough whisper more than anything. "I figured out why you thought it was so hilarious."

She laughs, her finger pausing in its descent toward his bellybutton as she looks up at him, remembering. He kisses her then, his cold fingers curling around her nape, and his other hand skimming up from hers on his chest and to the top of her arm. His clothes fall on top of their feet, but she barely notices. He pulls her forward and steps toward her at the same time, and his lips are a lot softer than she thought they would be.

He kisses her slowly, not opening his mouth to her when she flicks her tongue against his lip. His hand drops to her hip as she slides both of hers up, wrapping her arms around his neck. His fingers are freezing against the warm skin of her back, and she pulls her mouth away and presses closer to him on instinct with the shiver that passes through her.

His fingers slide up her back slowly, mimicking her finger earlier, and then curve back down to feel the goosebumps he left. She meets his eyes for two quick heartbeats before kissing him, sucking his bottom lip between her own, and she almost smiles, though it's sort of a ridiculous thing to do. His hand leaves her nape for the large clip in her hair, squeezing it, and dropping it into the sink somewhere beside them. Half her hair falls down, surrounding them with the scent of her shampoo as he reaches up for the second clip.

She threads her fingers in his hair, feeling droplets form and slide along her wrist as he drops the second clip in the sink. When his hand disappears into her hair, he finally opens his mouth, and she delves inside to taste the cold and him. She scrapes her nails across his neck, gently, and he pulls her tighter, his arm dropping to wrap

around her waist. He holds her hip, her shirt bunching in his fingers, and his other hand still exploring the warmth of her back.

She opens her eyes, just for a moment, curious, and finds his own closed. She's about to study him when he slips into her mouth, curling his tongue around hers, and her eyes close automatically as she hums. She can feel his smile in response, and she smiles back, because she doesn't know what else to do with the emotion. Their position, the exploratory slowness with which he is kissing and touching her, the intimacy, and the odd sweetness to such a snog reminds her of when she gave him her virginity.

Draco likes a lot of foreplay with sex, but it's all very touch, kiss, *lick, tug, pull, grabsuckbite*. Not that this is the first time he kissed her like this before sex. Before usually meant that she was in need of more comfort than losing her mind at that moment; or, more likely, because he was starting an absurdly slow burn that usually left her shaking, half-delusional, and with her throat raw by the end of it. Maybe it was from her previously sour mood, or what she had done today, or just because he felt like it. Whatever it is, she needs it, but she always needs it. Needs…

"Where's your room?"

She hardly cares about that at the moment, so she kisses him again and he lets her. His kiss is edged out with more demand now, his tongue thrusting into her mouth. She swirls her own around it, sliding her palm over his shoulder and down his chest. By the way his fingertips just edge into her pajamas, she knows he's about to take her on a journey, and it isn't one fit for the bathroom wall.

She pulls away from him reluctantly, almost changes her mind at the half-hooded look he gives her, and grabs his hand. She trips over his clothes as she moves around him toward the door, and thrusts an elbow back when he laughs at her. It meets air and then he is pressed against her back, his wet hair clinging to the side of her face, and his breath on her skin. His fingers skim under her breast, and he keeps his hand in hers as his mouth, warmed by her own, greet all the places on her neck that missed him.

"Shit," he breathes, and she's strangely happy it took him a good twenty seconds to draw his attention away from her enough to notice.

There are eighteen leaks in the ceiling of her claimed bedroom. One of them is a hole big enough to claim the rubbish bin for. The floor is littered with bowls, cups, pots, and the tin can her dinner had come in. It forms a symphony of rain, between the beating of it on the ceiling and the different echoes it made in her rain catchers.

"The, mm..." Draco is apparently done with surveying the room, and has returned his mouth to her neck. "The new recruits were here bef--"

She purrs when he sucks on the spot behind her ear, pressing back into him as his fingers stretch under the band of her pants and draw circles on the bottom of her stomach. He releases her skin to grin, she knows, like he always does when he manages to get that reaction from her. The first few times she had had no idea why that suddenly became a sound she could make, why she couldn't stop doing it despite how embarrassing it was, or why he always grinned when she did it. She figured she sounded like an idiot to him too, until one time she caught him muttering *Gryffindor* and something, something *little kitten* between his grin and her thigh, and she knew.

When his fingers make no movement downward, she turns in his arms, and he kisses her before she can even see him fully. She runs her hands down to his trousers, nudging him back to reach the button, and glares when he steps away completely. He smirks at her surprised look when he turns to shut the door she hadn't noticed was still open. He always closed it behind him when he entered the room last, so she didn't even think of him not doing so. He likes it when he distracts her enough to forget the simple things, or everything but him. He had been like that when they were kids - always wanting the attention, so long as it was positive.

When he pulls his palm back from the wood, it sways back open, and he pushes it shut again, his other hand pausing in the air when he sees the lack of a doorknob. She had forgotten about that too. He looks around quickly, because the war had made them resourceful no matter how little of resources they had. He grabs her trunk, yanking it in front of the door far easier and smoother than she had done earlier. He pulls his socks off next, one blue and one green, and she sees the empty space for the first time. He always wore socks unless they were doing this, and it isn't like she stared at his feet then. He even wore them just to sleep, though she always found it annoying to sleep in socks, like her feet were being suffocated. It was probably because of living in the dungeons at Hogwarts, or just because he is weird like that.

She looks up from the strange empty spot between his toes, and he's glowering at her. The socks were stuffed into the hole where the doorknob should have been, and he had probably been staring at her while she stared at his...nub. "It's cute," she tries, and rushes on when he scowls, "in a very...sexy, soldier sort of way."

His eyebrow hikes, and the left side of his mouth goes up, down, up, like he's trying to suppress a laugh. "*What*?" She can hear the laughter pulling at the back of his vocal chords.

She digs for some sort of vocabulary, wishing she hadn't even said anything. He likes to push the conversation or make her explain herself when she says something that embarrasses her and he finds funny or arousing. She shuts her mouth and glares at him, and he breaks, laughing. "Oh, shut up."

He steps forward and reaches for her hand, which she pulls back in annoyance, so he grabs her hips instead and pulls her toward him. She has to drop her glare to his shoulder but it doesn't stop the laughter bubbling up, and then she's joining in with him, because his happiness has become contagious to her.

"Prat," she mutters as he laughs between the kisses he presses to her neck. His fingers clench on her hips before grabbing her shirt and lifting it over her head.

"A prat with sexy toes, apparently."

She blushes again, rolling her eyes. She pushes at his shoulders but it doesn't mean anything because he hardly moves, and she's grabbing them a second later. She lifts herself to her toes, bringing her mouth to his jaw, determined to make him forget her comment. He hums, and she can feel it in his chest when he presses against her and in his throat, under her lips. His chest is dry from her shirt, but still cold against her skin, and she shivers with the feel of it. As soon as she moves her lips to his shoulder, he bends his head, his tongue gliding over the goosebumps as his fingers run the length of her spine.

He's unsnapping her bra as she licks the rain drops from his collarbone, and then it is completely black around them. Both their heads jerk up, and she makes for the bedside table and her wand, but Draco's arm has turned into a vice around her. He moves against her, and she can feel him pulling his wand from his pocket. He always kept it there once he removed his holster, and every night he would take it from his pocket and shove it under his pillow.

His arm moves wildly between the sounds of the rain catchers, and then they are completely still, both of them holding their breath. There is no wind against her and the outside sound is still muffled, which means the windows are shut. The trunk hasn't scraped against the floor, so the door is shut, and there are no voices outside of the room.

"That beer made me blind!" a male voice yells, distant, and then laughter.

"The electric went out from the storm, you idiot!"

"Oh, shit." A third voice.

"Do we have candles?" A fourth.

"Everyone remember that we're not supposed to use mag--" the second voice starts.

"Hello, Captain Obvious!"

"Shut up! I'm not the one who thought I was going blind!" Laughter again.

"Just go to bed!" A fifth.

No spells being yelled out, no screaming or creaking wood. She sucks in a breath and Draco follows, though both of them are still for several more seconds, making sure. "I used the last of my candles a few months ago. Do you have any?"

She doesn't know why she whispers it. Maybe it's because it's the dark, and there have been years where that meant to keep quiet. Maybe it was just something in humans - people always tended to talk a little lower when it was dark around them. Something about the softness of the night, or the way it hid away faces.

"No," Draco whispers back, and his arm lets up the death hold.

Thunder tears its way through the room, and she jumps when his fingers slide across her back. He gives a start when she touches the back of his shoulder, and sways them forward when she kisses his jaw instead of his mouth. She searches for it, trailing kisses across his skin until she meets his nose. She hovers for a moment, and it's him that moves forward, his lips soft and lax as they meet the corner of her mouth. He uses them to feel the way, just brushing them across hers as he reaches for her bra again.

His wand is still in his hand, poking her in the back as he unhooks, and she presses her lips more firmly to his, too impatient for almost-kissing. There's a pause as more laughter echoes down the hall, and then he slides a finger under one strap and his wand under the other, pulling them down her arms. She flicks her tongue against his, kissing him hard, and it distracts him enough for his hands to pause, his body rocking into hers. It pushes them back, and she gasps in surprise at the icy drizzle of water sliding down her back.

"What?" Draco asks gruffly, and she pulls her nails back from his arms.

"The water. It's freezing." It's still as dark in the room as it was when she closed her eyes. There is no fraction of light for her eyes to adjust to the shadows, to even

make out shapes. Outside of sleep, she's only ever known that sort of darkness during missions.

It makes her heart start thudding harder than Draco already had it, though she knows the enemies aren't here, and she can feel the polished smoothness of his wand down her ribs. Her bra drops somewhere over her shoulder and she presses herself against him, escaping the water and her thoughts. She focuses on the way his skin feels against hers, and the quick thumping of his heart under her mouth.

His hands are skimming up her sides as hers slide down his chest, wondering at how well her hands know him. The scar that runs on until…here, the one that curves in just another inch…here, the ridge of the muscle in…this spot, the way his muscles contract if she scratches her nails just…there, the freckle right…here, that spot he likes for her to bite right… He moans, cupping her bum and pressing her tighter against him. She grins, having never really noticed before just how well she knows his body.

He is one of her favorite subjects though, and she's always studied hard, and *oh, God*, how well he's taught her. Her mouth leaves his nipple as her hands meet the button on his pants, and she lowers herself down with the journey of her lips. He makes an annoyed sound when her bum is too low for him to fondle, settling for her back and then her shoulders. His stomach stops moving with breath for three seconds when her lips follow memory and press kisses along a scar near the bottom of his stomach. She unzips his pants, yanking them to his ankles.

She reaches for his underwear, her fingers curling into skin instead, and there's a short, breathy laugh above her. She pinches his thigh and he jumps a little, either at the little jolt of pain or the fact that he couldn't see it coming. She kisses the spot next and he jumps again, his hand reaching down for her hair.

"Cheater," she mutters, having been curious of just how jumpy she could make him when he could only know what she was doing once she already did it.

"Hm?" He gives a tug to her hair, and grabs her arm with his other hand, pulling her up by her arm so quickly she's almost dizzy.

She forgets what her reply was going to be when she's pressed into him again, the bit of hardness she had felt earlier now long and rock hard against her stomach. He uses his grip on her hair to angle her lips properly, and kisses her fiercely. His tongue is demanding, like he's claiming ownership of her mouth, and she's glad. Most times, she loved when Draco took his time about it, no matter how frustrated it made her. Other times she would try to turn him on to the point where he snapped

and just *did it already*, but it usually didn't work. Her relationship with his control, intact or gone completely, was one of love and hate, depending on her mood - and that counted for outside the bedroom, as well.

Sadly, within the two minutes it takes for his hands to roam the length of her body, her pajamas and knickers to be discarded, and her back to hit the floor, he got himself back together. The warmth of his body leaves hers completely until she's on the verge of making sure he didn't faint or something, and then she feels his mouth on her stomach. She pushes up into him, but then he's gone. Seconds pass as she scans the black, and then his kiss again, on her bellybutton.

She holds her breath, waiting, but it's not until she released it that he's back, his mouth hot and wet between her breasts. She reaches up for his head but it's air that greets her grasp, and her hands smack against her skin as she drops them. She can feel his grin a few seconds later, at the bottom of her stomach.

"Draco," she huffs, arching her hips.

Silence, and then, "Hm?" as he hums against her inner thigh.

She pants, trying to reach again when his hair tickles the underside of her breast and his lips meet her ribs. Again he's gone, back into the blackness he's using to his advantage. "You know what, you--" She hisses as his tongue moves up her slit. "Yes, okay."

Gone again, and she whimpers before promptly pressing her lips shut. He kisses right above her knee, then his skin brushes her hip, then his tongue just a little too far right to meet her nipple. He notices and licks his way over, and around, and she manages to grab his hair this time. It stops him from pulling back and he doesn't seem to mind, sucking her nipple into his mouth and rolling it with his teeth, his fingers brushing down her stomach. She moans loudly, her head falling back, and tugs on his hair to bring him up to her. He refuses, nipping and swirling his tongue in a path to her other nipple.

He slides a finger down her slit and prods forward, growling when he must realize just how much she doesn't *need* for him to be taking his time about it all. He replaces his mouth with his hand and pushes himself downward. She lets go of his hair when she decides that she rather likes his direction and it might be better than kissing him at the moment. She moans, her head thudding against the floor when he pushes a finger inside of her. He pumps it, adds another, gets her fingers curling back into his hair and digging against the floor. He starts to circle his tongue around her clit, and some strange, inhuman gurgle of sound tears from her throat as her

hips buck up.

"Dra--" She cuts off on a groan when he pulls away from her completely, and she hears him hum, a suck, and then a smacking sound in the dark.

Something clinks in front of her followed by the sound of water. Draco curses as water starts hitting tin, adding a different sound to the symphony of rain around them. Lightening cracks so close it might have been outside the window, and for a second, the whole room is lit. She can see him kneeling between her legs, half turned toward the knocked over can. The side of his face is red, his mouth gleaming wet, and he's so hard and swollen it might be painful. He's just turning to look at her in the light but then it's dark again, sucking them back into the void of night.

She makes a break for it, deciding she's had enough, but he's moving toward her at the same time. She thinks it's his shoulder that meets her chest, and she grunts, reaching up to grab him. His head clips her jaw, judging by his hair, and her teeth clink together. She lets out an injured noise, and this was supposed to go a lot smoother.

"That's why you should have stayed where I told you to stay," Draco drawls, voice gruff but somehow *smooth* over her, like something she might want to crawl into. "Are you alright?"

"I'll do whatever I please. And--" She cuts off when his fingers locate her thigh, pinching it.

"All is normal then," he mutters, and his nose slides against her cheek, jaw, and stops on her neck. He's murmuring against her skin, between the kisses and licks, but she can only make out odd words like 'show', 'see', 'do', 'beg', and 'so fucking good'.

She scrapes her nails up his back and then grabs his face, bringing his lips to hers *finally*. He grabs her face as well, pushing them both back until she's lying on the floor again. She thrusts her tongue into his mouth, the line of his teeth, the softness of his gums. She claims it in much the same way as he had hers earlier, and he moans, thrusting himself against her stomach. She loves it when he's all pressed against her like this, his weight making it a little harder to control the rage of her breathing, but she doesn't care. The heat created between them is scorching and heavy, but it only makes her feel more consumed by him.

Lightening cracks again, gone by the time she opens her eyes, and she's frustrated by that and the fact that he's pulling away again. He pushes up until all

she feels is his knee against her leg, and then his wet fingers tracking down her thigh. She gives a jump at the coldness, his hand leaving before both come back, cold and wet on her breasts. She squirms under his touch, exhaling heavily when it's gone.

She knows he's coming back again but she still lets out a shriek when his cold fingers wrap around her legs, and his ice cold mouth presses into her folds. His tongue is just as cold as it licks up the length of her, swirling and sucking until she's a mess of half words and trembling legs.

"So fucking hot," he rasps, and then water hits her stomach. She sucks in hard, feeling her stomach collapse, and then his tongue searching.

He sucks and laps until the puddle is gone around her bellybutton, and then slowly pours more water onto her chest. It runs through the space between her breasts - probably the place he meant to pour it in the first place - and it spans into little rivulets down her stomach. He tries to find each path with his tongue in the dark, and he's halfway through when it becomes too much of not enough.

"Draco, sit up for me?" She almost doesn't recognize her own voice, and she clears her throat, but it still feels heavy.

"What's wrong?"

"I just need you to sit back for a second."

He's silent and still for four crazy beats of her heart before he does as she asked, but she can practically feel the nervous tension in his body. She pushes herself up, her legs trembling, and she wobbles on her knees for a second. She reaches out, touching his chest half an arm's length in front of her, and his hand comes up to wrap around her wrist.

"Gran--" She cuts him off when she pushes him back, hard, both hands.

"I swear, Draco," she speaks over his surprised grunt as his back hits the floor, and the clink of tin again.

She swears, because there are a lot of things she would like to do to him. She wants to tease him with her hands and her mouth until he begs her, but right now she doesn't have the patience. He likes to push her to the edge, he loves to be the one that makes her lose control - he's told her himself. But he's driven her to a point where there's a wild need inside of her that makes her put thought second to action,

to *demand*, and she can be embarrassed about that later. When he's not right here, as exactly as she needs him.

That was the thing about the dark too. There was something about people not seeing your face. There was something that could bring out the animal in people, or confessions on the animal they had once been. Her friends used to tell her secrets in the dark. She had told her own. *I'm a witch,* she had said. *I can do magic*. They had laughed. Her neighbor tried kissing her in the dark, on a rock in his backyard, and she had been the one to laugh. She had run for her life in the dark, and killed in the dark, and cried in the dark when she found herself alone. It was as if the night could steal the moments from the morning.

Maybe she would have still done it with the lights on. Right now, she doesn't really care, because she's too focused to be shy about it.

"Swear..." He moans, jerking his hips up when she wraps her hand around him.

She crawls up his body, getting herself in the right spot by feel. She thinks of something witty to say, or sexy, or something fitting at all, but she's lost. She's never really done sexy as far as she knows, and... She glares at black when he starts to sit up, and she positions him where she wants him, sinking down the second his hands meet her ribs.

They both moan, and she looks up toward the ceiling, thanking God - which seems completely inappropriate, but she's pretty sure God knows she acts a bit inappropriate with Draco in general, so it might be okay. Draco's forehead hits her shoulder and his arms wrap around her, hissing curses into her skin as she starts to move. She always forgets just how *fantastic* this is with him. He filled her all up. Filled her up there, and here, and there, and here. Filled out her skin and ballooned her up and out with all these pretty, beautiful, dirty things.

She shuts her mouth firmly when she hears herself repeating the word 'balloon', latching onto it in a nonsensical mantra. Draco doesn't seem to notice, or care, his own words lost beneath the rain catchers music and the sound of slapping skin. "Beautiful," she can make out between random groans, mumbles, hisses, and curses. She smiles, her stomach rolling, and feeling stupid for it. Stupid and filled up. Yes, beautiful. This pretty, beautiful, dirty thing they made together.

Thirty-Eight

Day: 1521; Hour: 1

Hermione had woken up to darkness, Draco's hand on her breast and his mouth on her throat. Her back was sore enough to know she had slept for at least an hour or two on the unforgiving floor, and the storm outside had calmed. The thunder was no longer rumbling constantly, the wind wasn't threatening demolition, and the rain was softer above them. She let Draco explore - quite thoroughly, taking in the realization that he seems to know her body in the dark just as well as she knows his.

She had stretched her body against the wood and out for him, feeling strange. Blind, drowsy, the tinkling of rain, and with the softness of his touches, it almost felt dreamlike. She thought only simple things: the brush of his hair, the texture of his hands, the warmth of his mouth, the lines of the floorboards, the cushion of darkness, the calm. It didn't take long for him to fully wake her up, but the strange calmness lingered. She wonders if she can call it contentment. There's no rush to escape within him, she's just already there. Could she name it that?

He's taking his time about everything again. Probably because she didn't give him what he wanted earlier, and now he's determined to hear her desperate. To drive her to the point where she's thrashing around and muttering things like *Draco, Draco, please* on repeat, and blushing about it later. She had tried to sit up, to maybe do those things to him, but she had been unsure if she could and his hand had been too insistent when he pressed her back down again.

His wand is tracing up her stomach. She knows because of the thrum of magic she can feel against her skin. *His* magic, echoing into the wand, unused but strong against its confines. She knows Draco in a lot of ways, but to have his magic against her, and coursing from inside of him to her is something powerfully intimate. She hadn't ever thought about it, or thought it could be, but it leaves her a little raw, despite that he hasn't cast anything and she hardly feels it. It's like his heartbeat and his blood - it's part of his life force, the very essence of him.

He settles it on her breast, and when it rolls, he moves to balance it. "Don't let it fall," he says, answering part of her confusion, and his hands track down her arms.

He wraps his hands around hers, holding them within his own at her sides as he kisses his way up her thigh. She gives an incredulous look in his direction, though it doesn't matter, and holds his fingers in her palms. He pulls away for several

seconds, and she braces herself, but he only moves to her other thigh. She lets out a heavy breath and his lips curl before he nips her skin. She can feel his breath against her, and then he kisses the bottom of her stomach. When she lets out a frustrated groan, he laughs.

"Sinister, evil, lit--" She doesn't groan out of frustration this time, and she has to actively think to keep herself from grinding against his tongue.

She keeps herself in check for another minute, until he buries his face against her and thrusts his tongue. Her hips give a little jerk on their own accord, her moan cut short by the roll of his wand. She stills, locking herself in place, and the wand balances out again. She isn't about to lose whatever game he's playing, and playing well. She squeezes his fingers, and his thumbs start rubbing across her wrists. There is the trembling of her legs, the quickness of her breath, her blood rushing, and the pounding of her heart, but the rest of her is frozen.

The damn wand threatens escape with just her breathing, and it takes about as much as she has to not give in completely. She feels amazing, besides the fact that too much of her attention is focused on not letting the wand fall instead of what Draco's very talented mouth is doing to her. She's getting closer, a series of gasps and moans escaping her, and her eyes squeezed shut in concentration. She sincerely hopes that he doesn't expect her to keep it on her when she explodes, because she can feel the pressure mounting higher and higher, and she's about to lose control.

She's thrusting ever-so slightly against him, unable to help herself, when he completely ruins the victory she sees in sight. She barely manages to keep her body together when he gives a hard lick, but the second he begins sucking, her body deserts her mind and joins his side. Her hips thrust up, her back arches, and her nails dig into his hands. She cries out, moving her hips forward for him to repeat the sensation, but he's gone.

She collapses back, breathing raggedly, and her eyes open to look in accusation at the blackness in front of her. His thumbs are still rubbing along her wrists, but he's clicking his tongue at her. "Tsk, tsk, Granger. You let it drop."

"What?" she croaks out, her mind really only connected to the orgasm that was *this* close before he stopped.

"You let it drop." He sounds amused, the stupid jerk. He lets go of her hands to rub her hips, kissing her stomach, his lips wet. "Mm, and you were so close, weren't you?"

She blinks in shock, and then glares. What a complete prat. He had worked her up for what felt like an hour now, brings her seconds away, and then just *stops*. She has been patient enough, she figures, and if he was going to get so arrogant with his control, she would just have to take matters into her own hands like she had done earlier. She keeps glaring, reaching down, her knuckles hitting his nose or chin. She feels him pull back, his shoulder moving against her leg, maybe in surprise.

She feels relief already, and maybe just a bit of vindication, before he grabs her hand. She can picture his affronted look as she rolls to her side automatically, but stops at the sudden smack against her bum. Her breath shutters in surprise, and maybe at the jolt of pleasure that goes through her that she tries to ignore. *Did he just…*

"You're being very naughty, Granger." Oh, God. How is it even possible to become more aroused in this moment? And to *that*? "Put your hands down at your sides and roll over." He says this in the same tone he uses on missions, and her saliva gets caught up in her throat.

She huffs a laugh, her mind whirling but still indignant. Like he could just order… He smacks her bum again, and she moans in response. Her face heats up even more as she clamps her lips together, a new bead of sweat running down from her temple. He's silent for a few seconds, and then his fingers skate up the curve of her backside.

"You like that, don't you, Granger?" His voice comes out dark, almost dangerous, and her breath shudders as she shuts her eyes.

She doesn't answer, blushing wildly because she *does* like it. She never thought she could possibly like something like this. Does this make her strange? Would he think her weird, or… He smacks her again in the silence, and on the second one, another moan escapes her, and he has his answer. He hums, grabbing her hand and pulling it away from her, though she had stopped all movements at her new found sexual deviancy.

"Do you know what happens to naughty girls, Granger?" he asks in that same dark voice, and oh, God, she has a feeling.

She feels a bit like a small animal under the eyes of a panther, or, or…a snake. His mouth comes down to her hip, and his tongue swirls before he nips the skin, sucking it and drawing the blood up. His fingertips brushing her skin are a contrast to the savageness of his mouth, and she breathes out loudly, pushing her hip against him. His hand comes down in sharp slaps, and his breathing is a little ragged

against her hip as she bites her lips, curling her fingers against the sheet and her stomach.

"And do you know what happens when you're a good girl?"

They both wait, him rubbing the overheated skin, and she feels a little awkward and a little too excited. This is new, and very different, and she doesn't know what to do with herself. All she knows is that she likes it, and that she's curious, and that Draco has never made her feel ashamed. At least, not here, within the heat of him. She still has to stop the urge to put a hand over her face.

His kisses trail over her hip and to her bum, his lips cool in comparison to the heat he formed there, and smacks her on the other cheek. She whimpers at the mixed sensation, squirming away at the jolt of hurt under his palm, only to push herself back again. "What?"

"I might let you come."

Day: 1521; Hour: 9

She opens her eyes to light. The sun is shining through the windows, and she can hear the birds calling through the washed world. She blinks and squints, adjusting, and looks in wonder. The light is coming through the holes in the ceiling, where the rain had been coming in. They stream like laser beams of white light, hitting all throughout the room like little spotlights. It reminds her of how the sun looks coming through the trees sometimes. It's beautiful.

Draco is asleep, his face buried against her neck and hair, as if to shield the light from him. He's on his side, his arm thrown over her hips and his other stretching out above their heads, likely holding his wand. His leg is between hers, his hair sticking up against her face, and his stomach rising evenly at her side. She's on her stiff back, one arm around his shoulders, and her other hand reaching out to float through the sunbeam. It turns her palm bright white, and she dances her fingers through it.

She feels dirty, but in a good sort of way that she wouldn't ever tell anyone. The amount of things that had dried on her skin should be making her dash toward the shower, but she smiles at it instead, remembering. She looks down the length of him, glad to be able to actually see him, her eyes lingering on the curve of his bum, and then the bite marks she left as revenge on his skin. She can see two - one on his hip, another on his shoulder. Her memories are interrupted by the sound of loud laughing, and she remembers what woke her up in the first place.

"I'm going to do it! I'm going to go hunt and kill a cow or something!"

"Are there any cows in the woods?"

"Yeah, I don't know if there are cows just roaming around anywhere."

"Take this knife and go sculpt a spear out of a branch…or something."

"Uh…why not just use the knife?" More laughing.

Draco moves against her, shifting, and takes a breath, holds it, and releases it. He almost always does the same thing when he wakes up and plans on staying that way. She moves her hand from the sunbeam and to her eyes, wiping the sleep away. She stretches now, pushing out her legs and straightening her back. Her muscles ache, and she's sore, but still content. Maybe a little embarrassed as well in the light of day, from her actions and reactions. She feels exposed now.

Draco's arm pulls back and up from her hips, brushing her skin on the way up. She jumps a little when he gives a gentle squeeze to her breast before moving on to rub his face. He makes an amused sound at the movement and she purses her lips at his shoulder. They still feel a little swollen, and she wonders how much sleep they even got.

He pulls his arm down from above them and lifts himself up on his elbow. She almost smiles at his sleepy face, but squirms instead when his eyes drift down her body. A look of surprise claims his features, and she feels distinctly uncomfortable - the sensation of wanting to wiggle out of your own skin. Sure, it had been pitch black last night, but it wasn't anything he hadn't seen before and seemed to accept just fine.

"Shit," he breathes out, and when his eyes meet hers, they are bright and amused. "I might have ravished you."

She takes a second, trying to shake the cobweb of sleep from her mind. "Might have?"

He gives her that cocky, satisfied male smirk, his gaze traveling down again. "Have you seen?"

She lifts up on her elbows, looking down at herself, expecting something horrifying. There are fingerprint bruises, bite marks on her thigh, shoulder, and hip. Red welts from his mouth are scattered across her skin. She has a feeling there will

be at least one on her bum and another on the back of her thigh, if memory served. Only God knows what her neck looked like at the moment.

Holy..., she thinks; he had left marks on her before, but nothing like this. She remembers the mark she had given him when Margarete was trying to shag him, and the possessive mark he had given her in turn. If that's what it's about, she's pretty sure Draco had up and claimed her body all his.

He was the only person in the world who ever saw her so out of control of herself. She wonders if he knows that. It isn't just about sex. It's the fact that he knows a part of her that no one else in the world does. That he might know it more than even she does, and she wonders if he knows how much she must trust him in order for him to see it, let alone know it. She wonders at the animal that must have overtaken him, the amount of passion that fueled him, to mark her so…abundantly. Then she wonders if maybe she knows a part of Draco that no one else knows either. That she knows the person that comes out of him in the dark, when his face is hidden, and she isn't laughing, and it doesn't scare her in the least.

She stops thinking when she looks up and finds him staring back, watching her. She gives him a glare with no heat, and looks at his shoulder. "And to think I felt bad when I saw that this morning."

He looks at the bruise of her teeth, and then back at her. She smiles at him, because she thinks he might need to know that she doesn't mind. Maybe he wants her to. Maybe he wants her to be angry that he left all these marks on her, that he became possessive of her, that there might have been some sort of barbaric claiming in his passion. But she's far more concerned with him knowing it's fine with her, in case he wants it to be, because it is. It is in a way that she doesn't think about.

She looks back down at his shoulder again, and then at his neck. She blinks at the two welts there, another on his collarbone, and a bite above his nipple. Fingerprint bruises on the back of his hands and shoulder, the bite at his hip, and a red mark on either side of his pelvic bone. She flushes, just a little, a small part due to her own barbaric tendencies, and mostly because of her memories.

Draco looks down at himself, and she can see his eyebrow come up. He hums, and she's entranced by his finger as it circles his nipple and the bruise above it. He had practically roared his orgasm when she did that. He seems to remember this, judging by the look he levels at her.

"You *were* a very naughty woman last night." She blushes hot red, like she did the morning after she told her friends she was a witch. Like William had, the night after

he kissed her on the rock. She thinks to make excuses for the bathroom, but then: "I don't know if I ever came so hard in my life."

She blinks at him, but he's looking at his finger, now circling the bruise on her breast. Something wells up inside of her until she forgets her embarrassment and, for a second, she can't stop the grin. She bites her lip, reaching out to trace the lines of his nipple and the bruise like he had, his own finger sliding down to the next welt.

He lifts his head to look at her and she reaches up with her other hand, with no conscious permission, and runs her finger down the length of his nose. It's the move that started the whole thing last night, and the corner of his mouth starts to lift.

"I--" he starts, and then the pound of footsteps has them both looking to the door, stilling.

"I'm gonna get me some chickens! Orders up, orders up! Chicken, beef, and if I can find some..." The voice trails off, and then in a breath of shock, asks, "*Harry Potter*?"

"The food," Hermione can hear Harry's voice answer, tiredly, "is in the coat closet in the living room."

Silence, Draco still tense against her from the moment the boy got out the first name. Then, a weak "Oh," from in front of their door.

"Do you know if Hermione Granger is here? About...curly hair like..." Draco snorts at Harry's description, and what was bound to be some exaggerated hand placement. She pinches the skin her finger was hovering over and he growls, pinching her back.

"Ow," she whispers, cradling her breast, and he snorts again. Probably because he's done it a lot harder before, to a completely different reaction.

He starts to pull away, and her hand darts out, grabbing his arm before she can even think about it. It's just that she doesn't want him to think he has to leave just because Harry's here and looking for her. Harry didn't sound like it's an emergency, some awkward conversation continuing in the hall about war heroes and the best way to hunt chickens. She thought she had proved to Draco that she doesn't care, but maybe it's going to take more on her part to convince him.

Or maybe he's just done after such an exhausting night, and found no reason to just lie with her if they aren't going to shag. Maybe she looks like an idiot for

grabbing his arm and stopping him, or maybe too needy. There's a part of her that's always afraid of him catching on too much, or coming across like she doesn't care at all. It's this fine line, and all she really knows is that she doesn't want him to leave or to stop this...whatever it is.

He had pulled away from her when she seemed to be getting too attached. He had pulled away from her when she seemed to not care, or think he was worth something. Maybe Draco doesn't know what he wants either. Maybe this is confusing to him as well. Maybe they both can't stop anyway.

She thinks quickly under the questioning looks he's giving her. "I just want to...check something."

One eyebrow comes up as she rolls her eyes at herself, and the other follows when she pushes him onto his back. She traces the marks she left on him with her fingers as she moves down his body, and he's half-hard against her stomach, then her breasts. She settles between his legs, and doesn't look up at him.

"Surprisingly, it's still there," he whispers, smirking, and then grinning when she blushes.

He lifts himself up on his elbows when she wraps her hand around him. *Naughty*, he mouths at her, and she decides she might leave another mark or three.

Day: 1521; Hour: 12

Hermione gasps when Draco's feet skid out, his arm flailing out for balance, when Harry's hand smacks into grip on Draco's forearm. Draco's entire body tenses, having almost just fallen off a roof and probably because it had been Harry who stopped him. Harry leans back, pulling Draco back to more solid footing, and they exchange very manly nods and quickly act like it never happened.

"You're like Molly down there, Hermione." Harry sends her a grin, a streak of spackle across his cheek.

"Well, you need to be more careful. I don't know why you insist on fixing this place up anyway."

She had found Harry, Draco, and two of the new recruits circled around the kitchen table after she had done her best to wash up with the water in the rain catchers. As much as she hadn't minded her dirty state when waking up, it was a whole different feeling when facing the rest of the day without running water. The

things Harry had asked her to pick up for him were laid out, and Harry had been explaining how to patch a roof. She isn't sure why they all agreed to fix up the wreckage that stood as a house, but they had. Maybe it's because they have nothing else to do but bide their time, waiting for a mission calling, or for the coin to grow hot, or for anything at all.

Most of the missions had to do with rescue or retrieval, and the Death Eaters aren't making any new moves. They come out for a night or a week, and then something in their plan fails, and they're back in hiding again. If there weren't so many of them left, and if they weren't still so organized, it would probably mean the end of the war. Sometimes it feels painful, how close they must be, and other times it's painful to think how long they might still have.

Staying in one spot means a lot of time in your head, and it isn't a good place to be when the war is still a war. It makes people do crazy things. Like stun Muggles, or attack their friends, or themselves. A man had killed himself in the middle of the Ministry last week, Ron had said, and then he just sat there for too long. Sat there, silent, until she forced him into playing chess with her. It scares her, too much time in their heads.

"Well," Harry answers, after explaining something to the boy next to him, "I figured it's either this, or the next storm is bound to blow us to the other side of England. You know, this Auror came back with me after our mission last week…she cried when she walked in. I mean…*cried*. Ron told her she was hurting the house's feelings…you know Ron."

She laughs at his shrug, and he smiles back. "I wouldn't expect anything else from him."

"Course not. So, I thought we can at least stop the rain from coming in. Make sure it's still here for the next team."

"Where did you learn to do this anyway?"

"You don't even want to know," he mutters, and she catches it on the wind.

Draco's willingness surprised her the most, but he had no mission to plan, no television to watch, and Harry's challenging look didn't hurt - she would bet it was the last that decided it for him. It probably shouldn't look strange, watching him work at the roof, shingles pinned under his arm, but it does. She had seen him do a lot of Muggle things, but patching a roof reminds her of summer, and her dad and uncles drinking too much beer to be balancing themselves at the top of the house.

It's to see Harry up there too. Or, maybe, just to see the two of them together like this. Heads bent across from one another, both working diligently, and laughing together over whatever the younger boy said.

They both glance toward her then, the laughter apparently *about* her, and she's automatically suspicious. "What?"

"Adam wants to know if you'll fetch him a drink."

She's pleased then, that they both seem to know her so well. Both of the men exchange a knowing look, and then look awkward, as if just realizing that the other knows her well enough too. She supposes it will take some time before they get used to her being common ground between them, along with the war. Or, at least... She hums inside her head, overriding the noise of her thoughts.

"Adam can get it himself."

While Harry had dropped the paint can in front of her and the other girl, Allison, *Adam* decided to inform them it was because painting was a woman's work, and patching a roof was more fit for a man. Draco had settled against the wall, as if awaiting a show, and Harry had grabbed the boy's shoulder to pull him toward the door. She had only managed to tell him to find a paintbrush before Harry quickly closed the door behind them.

"Are you done painting?" Harry asks her, after another gasp when his foot slips, her hand reaching out as if the strength of her wrist could save him from crashing to the ground.

"Do you want me to leave?" She glares at the exasperation in his tone.

"You're hovering," Draco tells her distractedly, pulling one of the shingles out from under his arm.

She mutters darkly on her way back inside.

Day: 1521; Hour: 18

The rain hits late afternoon, the thunder ripping, and the world turning dark enough for the shadows to remind them the electricity isn't back on yet. The other three young faces return with candles, not enough beer, and a sealed envelope for Draco. She stares at it as if she had X-ray vision, and he drops it unopened into his trunk, before dragging it into her room.

The living room looks half decent, and odd when roaming through the rest of the house. The guys had enough time to fix the roof in the living room and kitchen, but there had only been enough paint for the former. It looks clean, though the floor is still warped and water damage still spots the ceiling, but it's somehow brighter than the gloom outside should allow.

They eat their dinner from cans, cold and mostly gross, though the beer warms them up. Hermione trades a second for a sweater, and Harry gives her the same look he used to give her after Quidditch victories. Their younger companions decide on buying more paint tomorrow, throw jokes at one another, and their laughter forms a constant chain of sound. Allison takes pictures, though she's pretty sure Draco scowls in every one of them, and that her hair appears like a wild beast on top of her head. Harry's voice is strained when he refuses to talk about the Graveyard, but he's bright when they start asking about Hogwarts.

"What did you use the Polyjuice for?" Every head snaps toward Draco, though for different reasons. He had mostly been silent since taking his trunk out of the room, he had just interrupted Hermione's *very educational explanation* on brewing Polyjuice, and he also had no idea why they had.

"To collect information," Hermione rushes out, forcing herself not to glance at Harry, because Draco is too observant.

"So, yeah... Hermione turned into a cat."

She glares at Harry, because she had been hoping he would change the subject entirely, or at least never, ever, ever bring that up. Ever. "Well, Harry--"

"Wait... I thought you couldn't turn into an animal with Polyjuice?" Toad interrupts her fumbling as she searches her memories for an embarrassing incident to bring up in revenge.

She doesn't even know *why* the wizard is named *Toad*, and when she had refused to call him that, he had refused to tell her his real name. "You can't," she answers, leveling him with a sour look, but he's probably used to it by now.

"It didn't go well." Harry is snickering, and she jabs him in the ribs with a rather sturdy finger. He makes an injured noise and rubs at the spot, then gives her a grin. "Alright, alright...how about the troll?"

She takes a second, and then smiles at her knees, remembering. Harry launches into the story for the young Aurors, and Hermione adds in her bits, watching Harry's

face instead of anyone else's reactions. They had always been battling something, her, Harry, and Ron. Their entire friendship was formed on the foundations of it - danger, threat, war, death, battles, survival. They would need to get used to that too, she thinks. Just being normal. Just patching roofs, and lunches on work breaks, and a few drinks at the pub. That weird shock of normal lives.

She thinks they need this reminder of where they came from, and just *why* everything was going to work out. A friendship forged in such dangerous elements, that was built through the absolute *need* of the other to survive, *had* to survive those same elements from which it came. No matter what, it has to.

So she stays, until the strategically placed candles are half-burnt away, the night is dark, and the storm threatens to sweep them all away. She stays until she's yawning more than she's talking, and Harry yanks her off the couch and pushes her in the direction of her room. The Aurors pay her no attention, going on about how they took their O.W.L.S and N.E.W.T.S through the Ministry, and Harry laughs at her when she stumbles in her stretching. She glares, but smiles at the same time, because the lines on his face are less grave and his eyes aren't as dull as they have been.

Hours later, long after Draco left the room, when the beer is gone but the laughter still echoes after her down the hall, she finds him pensive with his notebook on his lap. There isn't even a glance in her direction as she collapses in exhaustion onto the bed, almost damp with the moisture in the air. She stares at him under a blanket that's too thick in summer and too thin in winter, and besides the tightening around his eyes, she would think he didn't even notice. She's asleep before she can ever wonder about the envelope again.

Day: 1522; Hour: 8

She wakes up to the groaning and squeaking of floorboards and jerks up, her hand slapping into her chest before flying to the bedside table. She blows the hair out of her eyes, her wand aimed to the last place she heard the noise. Draco continues drying his hair, and there might have been amusement on his face, but it's gone just a second later. Sometimes her dreams have the power of making her fear every sound.

"I crossed half the room before you even woke up."

"Yeah, well...shut up," Hermione mutters, tossing her wand to the empty side of the bed and collapsing back into the stiff mattress.

"The electric is back on."

"Finally."

"Toad made breakfast."

"Eggs ala Toad. Mm."

"Did you purposefully Polyjuice into a cat?"

"N--" She cuts herself off.

She glares at the ceiling, reaching up to rub at her face. So that's why he kept talking - get her in the habit of snapping something back, and he figured she might not notice something she might not want to answer. He knows her well, but she didn't think she appeared *that* slow in the morning.

"Do you really want to know?" She can practically *feel* his eyebrows raising, because he wouldn't have asked if he didn't want to. She's supposed to know him well, too. "No."

"I gathered that. Whose cat did you turn into?"

"Uh--"

"Anything that starts with 'uh' is bound to be a lie, Granger. Try again."

She manages to lift her head and glare at him this time. "Maybe I was trying to remember."

"Right."

"Millicent Bul--"

"Tell me Potter or Weasley, or whatever little Gryffindor, did not take on my form." He says this like a demand, so she glares harder.

"Yes, Ron did. Then he-- Oh, calm down, I'm kidding. They were Crabbe and Goyle. They got you blabbering about the Chamber of Secrets, and we went on our way."

"The… *What* the fuck."

"Don't be angry, it hardly matters. You didn't know anything about it anyway, so it was pretty useless. Except in taking you out of the pool of suspects. Though I can't say you hoping it was me who died made us think any better of--"

"I didn't give a fuck what you thought. If you died, Potter died, any bloody Gryffindor, why would I care?" Well, *that* was *rude*. He could have at least *apologized* or someth-- "I doubt you would have looked upon my own death with more than a faint glance at the obituary."

"Oh, please, I'm not that callous," she snaps, but works to calm herself at the angry set of his body, growing tighter, tighter, tighter. "I would have at least gave it a thorough read."

She tries to smile, like the possibility of his death or their mutual once-hatred could be funny, but she doesn't know what else to do. It didn't really matter anymore, not really, not enough. He's too angry though. She really shouldn't have admitted to the whole incident, but it was the past, just like the rest of the things they left behind.

"I didn't mean--"

"I suppose we got payback the following year, rather than--"

"Wait, what?"

"The boys and I had been curious about what a Mudblood might look like under their clothes. So we brewed the potion and Greg sauntering around as a naked Granger in our--" She cuts him off with the pillow that smacks into his face, and then the candle that sails over his shoulder.

"You--"

"Doesn't feel too good, does it, Granger? Knowing your pri--"

She cuts off his diatribe and sinister look with the second pillow. "You intolerable--"

"Stop throwing shit at me!" he barks out, throwing the pillow back at her. She smacks it out of the way, lumbering to her feet in huffs and insults. "Should I be the one telling *you* to calm down n--"

"Calm down? Yo--"

"Don't be angry, Granger, it hardly matters," he repeats her with a sneer.

"I know you're lying about the Polyjuice, Malfoy," she bites out, pointing her finger at him, but not pausing in her stomp toward her trunk. "You wouldn't have wanted to see a *Mudblood* naked, no matter how--"

"How do you know?"

"Because I do! You were probably too stupid to even *brew* one in--"

"I had top marks in Potions!"

"Because Snape liked you more!"

"Bullshit!"

"Truth!"

"If you think it's a lie that I did it, why the fuck are you so angry?" he yells, and she's surprised the fabric of the towel hasn't ripped between the clenching of his fists.

"You're so stupid," she growls, yanking her clothes out of her trunk.

"Stop calling me stupid, Granger, or--"

"You just called me a Mudblood!"

"*What*?" What. *What*, and a look like she had just told him the whole war was a big prank on him.

"You said--"

"I was talking about when I was fifteen! I wasn't exactly calling you a Muggle-born the year after I said I wanted you dead!"

"Well, it sure came out of your mouth easily enough *now*, wh--"

"I don't believe it's time for you to start PMS-ing yet, Granger, so--"

He's lucky her wand is still on the bed. "*Oh*, like--"

"If you think I still look at you as a 'Mudblood', I'll bring you to Mungo's myself, right. Fucking. *Now*."

"I'm not saying that!"

"Then, please, *enlighten me*," he says, throwing his arms out.

"You didn't have to use that word!"

"I wasn't calling you one! I--"

"You said what a Mudblood looks like under their clothes, and then--"

"Indirectly, as a thought process of my fourteen-year-old self, who - in case you have forgotten - used--"

"I don't care! I--"

She doesn't really know why she's so angry, but her heart is pounding. That word rarely bothered her. Even when he called her it in the past. She hadn't grown up around it, she didn't even know what it meant at first, and in her head it was just some equivalent to a rude swear that didn't define her. The war made it heavier. It made it a burden.

It just felt... It just *hurt* to even hear him say that word now. To so easily use it in reference to her, no matter if it's just in repeating the thoughts of his younger self. It's like a slap. It's not pain, but any sort of hurt in the wake of the surprise feels magnified, because you weren't expecting any at all. She imagines she would react in some way had it been from someone else she knew too. But she wonders if the reaction is bigger with him because of the past, or because missteps from the ones we allow ourselves to be the most vulnerable around are more dangerous than a stranger stomping on nerves.

It hurt, and maybe it shouldn't have, but for a minute, it did. She knows he doesn't feel that way anymore, that he *can't*, but... "Whatever."

"I don't think so, Granger. You're not--"

"It's fine. I know you didn't mean it like that, it just...caught me off guard, I guess. I..." She pauses, then rushes on. "I don't like to hear it. Even... No matter the reasoning. It's fine, Malfoy."

He raises an eyebrow at her, and he drawls like he has never been more bored in his life. "Really?"

"Ye-- And by the way, Malfoy," he doesn't look surprised when her anger comes back, "I, or we, really, do one little thing that didn't even effect your life in any possible way, and you're angry over it? *This* coming from the man who went on and on about the war, and how it didn't matter what you did to me in the past bec--"

"I never said it didn't matter--"

"Yes, you did! You--"

"I was momentarily a little *pissed off* that you and your band of saviors managed to intr--"

"It's not like it wasn't for a goo--"

"The point is that you did, that it was to me, and that I have the right to be pissed off about it for five minutes! It's not like I was going to--"

"It's not like you didn't do worse!"

He's silent, vein thumping, and she's almost nervous in the twenty-two seconds it takes for him to reply. "Right. I don't have the right to be angry about anything, even for five minutes, because I did worse things than what I got. That it? I guess I shouldn't have been pissed at Vince for killing Neville, since I killed his girlfri--"

"That is not what I meant," she breathes out, and rushes on louder when he makes to speak. "That is not what I meant! I ju--"

"That's *exactly* what you meant. If you're going to feel that way about one thing, you better apply it across the board. Furthermore, you better *damn well* apply it to yourself! Or, that's right, you don't count when it comes to your own-"

She makes a series of very threatening hand gestures as she growls, but he doesn't have the decency to look threatened. "You're putting words in my mouth!"

"I--"

"You just--"

"I can't believe you're not over this. I--"

"I *am* over it!" Hermione yells, throwing her hands up. Her clothes fall out of her grasp and she bends to snatch them off the floor, trying to control her breathing.

"Obviously not! You--"

"Yes, I am, and don't tell me something else when I know how I feel! The only reason I brought it up was because you were so angry over something in the past, when I managed to get over our--"

"For ten seconds before you freaked--"

"Ten seconds? You're still angry! You--"

"Because you went mad over a word I didn't call you, and *haven't* called you in years! Like I--"

"I told you, it's fine! I just don't like you saying it, and..." *It hurt my feelings?* It sounds so stupid, when she thinks of saying it out loud. "It just threw me off. I know you didn't call me it. I'm obviously over the past, Draco. I mean...obviously."

She gives another look to the clenching of his jaw and then closes her trunk, sitting on it. She fiddles with the lock and then clicks it shut, turning and turning it past the spiral of numbers in his silence.

"If I had really done the Polyjuice thing to you, would you be angry?"

"You did?" Her head snaps up to his blank face, and he turns to toss the other pillow back onto the bed.

"Answer me."

She glares at him, even though she doesn't want to fight with him anymore. She doesn't have the energy, and it's stupid, and she shouldn't have freaked out over such a little thing. It was knee-jerk. If he had actually called her it now, and not in reference to the past...that would have been different. But she doesn't think he would, not now, no matter how angry he gets with her or how much he wants it to hurt. And if she hadn't forgiven him for the past, she wouldn't allow herself to believe that.

"Yes, I would be." More like blinded by rage. "I get your point. *But*, if you're still angry about it a week from now, I--" She cuts off at the voice in the hall.

"Hey, Harry, I got your change from the paint… What?"

She looks up at Draco to find him staring at the door, and the floorboard creaks behind her back, followed by quick steps down the hall. Harry. He had probably been ready to break down the door at any sign she might need him. Draco doesn't appreciate the effort, judging by the hard look that replaces the weariness.

"I don't like fighting with you," she admits, trying to calm the rising tide of his anger again.

"I couldn't be more surprised."

She breathes a laugh, shrugging a shoulder and looking back down at the lock in her fingers. "I *usually* don't like fighting with you."

"Mm."

"This is strange, though. One of us usually storms out by now, and then we don't talk for a week. Or a couple hours, if one of us just…" *jumps the other one*.

"You're blocking the door."

"Wh-- Oh." She does laugh then, and she can see the amusement start to edge out his anger as he turns, tossing his dirty clothes into a corner of the room. "And…the Poly--"

"No, I didn't."

She smiles faintly and nods, because she knew he had been lying."I don't hold the past against you, Draco, you--"

"Just shut up, Granger."

"I would never be able to even spend time wi--"

"Hermione." This makes her look up, and they stare at one another for almost twelve seconds before he starts gesturing toward her. "I suggest you get a shirt instead of three pairs of pants, though the knickers can remain optional."

"Oh." She stares at the clothes in her hand, and then looks up at him, narrowing her eyes. "Were you going to tell me that before we stopped fighting?"

He smirks, sitting on the bed as he unrolls a pair of socks, one black and the other white. She shakes her head, turning back to the trunk, and making sure to pick out the right pieces of clothing this time.

"I am who I was." His voice is low, but it's strong, sure.

Her movement freeze for a moment before she lifts her chin, searching for a pair of knickers. "I know." She lifts a bundle of photographs before she finds a small pile of them. "I wouldn't change that." And she means it. She doesn't know where he'd be or the person he'd be without who he had been, and it feels important to admit it.

He's quiet for several seconds of distant sound, and then the bed creaks. "I won't say it again."

She thinks he means Mudblood, and she knows he'd ignore her if she asked him to clarify. Or get angry, because she isn't the only one who does that when they feel vulnerable. Her body is awkward in its positioning, and she doesn't know how to move it for a moment, and her heart picks up a little speed against her ribs.

"Okay." She stands, the lid of the trunk thudding shut, and then she heaves it away from the door.

Thirty-Nine

Day: 1522; Hour: 12

Hermione stares at the walls of her temporary room, reaching toward Draco's trunk to set down the knife she had been using to scrape off the mold. She sends an unappreciative glance at the two paint cans in front of her, and decides at least it's better than what's there.

Allison's boyfriend - who she hadn't stopped talking about since rather rudely staring at the two marks on Hermione's neck - returned with purple, yellow, and brown paint. Hermione had blinked at the cans for seven seconds before Allison and Harry, her boyfriend, had left for one of the bedrooms with the purple. Hermione was still calling him Harry, despite the fact that he had been dubbed 'Junior' and 'The-Other-Harry' - pronounced 'toe' - before majority opinion led to 'Harry Twatter' the night before. Hermione wasn't about to call him Twat, or Twatter, no matter the permission from Harry and snort from Toad. Honestly.

"Granger." Hermione jumps, the yellow streaking out of the even line she had been painting down the wall. She looks to her right, her left, and then behind her before he laughs at her. "It's the voice of God, Granger. I came to apologize for your hair."

She glares at him, then the familiar snort of laughter somewhere above her, finding his face at the hole in the corner. She hadn't realized just how big it was until she saw it in comparison...actually. "I hadn't realized how big that hole was until I saw how well your inflated head fit in it."

"Hilarious," he drawls, and a bit of the roof gives away under his hand on the edge of the hole, crumbling down into the rubbish bin below. It plunks into the rain water, and he adjusts his weight as she gives the ceiling another distrusting look. "What is that color?"

"It's called *yel-low*," she says slowly, her lips twisted up in an encouraging smile. He scowls and she grins.

"I'm not staring at yellow walls."

She grabs the can she had been using and then the brown, holding them up to him. She had thought about asking him in the first place, but it had felt too personal.

Like it was their room, in their house, or something weird like that. Like they were staying for a long time, and like he might care. That's why she figured she would just paint it yellow, instead of even waiting for anyone to get back with something different. It wasn't supposed to matter to her, and asking him what he wanted was like…claiming the room was the two of theirs, their own personal space. It made things…solid.

Draco stares at the paint cans, and then looks up at her. "You want me to pick between dirt brown and sun-fuck yellow?"

"It's all Harry brought back."

"There's more coming."

"Yellow is happy."

"Yellow is the color of urine, bees with stingers, stomach bile, puss, kidney problems--"

"Draco," she laughs out, amused and exasperated at the same time. "What do you want, *green*?"

"Sure, I'll go with that." Like it had been her suggestion, but his face is gone before she can correct him.

Day: 1522; Hour: 13

"They're asking for more."

"Hm?"

"Harry, Malfoy, and Toad. They're still hungry."

She isn't that surprised, considering she had taken water out to them a half hour ago and they had chugged their glasses in seven seconds flat. They were sweat-soaked with their serious faces on, and didn't seem to be suffering from the headache she had got with all the hammering. It reminds her of missions, except what they encountered on missions usually canceled out physical labor's call for sustenance. They all needed to eat more.

"Noodles good for you, Justin?"

He grins easily, accepting the plate of sandwiches to bring outside. "The bread is stale anyway."

Day: 1522; Hour: 14

His hand is all heat when he grabs her hip, pushing her forward to slide past her in the hall. She can feel the warmth coming off of him and through her shirt, the smell of sweat surrounding her. She glances over at him, his shirt wet down the back as he ducks into her room, and there's a small thud before he's back in the hall again. Harry and Toad had stripped their shirts off over an hour ago, but Draco had left his on. He probably burns easy, and at the thought, an image comes to her mind of him frozen on the ground, his skin burnt a hot red, and soaked in his sweat as she tried to force a potion down his throat. She shakes her head once, again, and then narrows her eyes at him in concentration to swap the images.

"Compromise," he tells her, nodding his head over his shoulder as he heads into the bathroom.

Which is good. She had been painting the kitchen when she spotted a stream of yellow through the window. She hadn't been very pleased with Toad's choice, and had made it quite clear that peeing off the roof wasn't tolerated. Not that she could imagine Draco deciding to pee off a roof.

"Compromise?"

He grunts before closing the bathroom door, like he's too overheated to speak. She's hot too, but at least she's out of the sun. She peeks into the room, finding a can of blue paint sitting in front of the patch of yellow on the wall. Compromise. She can't stop looking at the yellow without thinking *puss* now, and green would have made her feel like she was in the middle of a forest. She's there far too often, no matter how much she loves nature.

She goes back to painting the hall, wiping her own sweat from her forehead. Justin laughs when he looks over at her, staring at her forehead. "Paint?"

"Just a bit." He has kind eyes. The sort that crinkle and almost disappear with a grin. They make a person want to feel at ease and trust him, so she thinks they're the most dangerous sort in the end. "It looks really ridiculous," he says on a laugh, but his eyebrows are drawn down as his shoulders scrunch up, too apologetic to be offensive.

She waves her paintbrush at him menacingly, and he puts his hands up, taking a

few steps back, still grinning. "I'll turn you yellow in two seconds."

Justin opens his mouth to speak, but stops at the scraping sound of the bathroom door opening. He points to Hermione, dropping the grin and widening his eyes in full innocence. "She's vicious."

Draco ignores him, continuing down the hall without even a glance in his direction. Hermione glances between the two as Justin turns back to the wall. She's well aware of how rude Draco can be, but sometimes she forgets how much he really doesn't care about people he doesn't know. He could have at least grunted in acknowledgment.

"Are you going to ask him?" She looks at Justin with his whispered question, and then at Draco as he pauses at the end of the hall.

He turns toward them, looking at her with his eyebrow raised, and like she's taking up a significant portion of his valuable time. "Justin is going to take off the rest of the wallpaper in the kitchen so we can paint, so we wanted to know if you had an extra...scraper thing."

What did her father used to call those things? Putty scraper? Putty knife? Spackle scraper?

Draco's eyebrows draw together, probably from her word choice, and his eyes dart over to the boy currently pretending to ignore them. "Weren't you listening to Potter ramble on and on this morning, or do you just expect people to listen when you do it? He remembered it wrong. Hence the hammering now. I'll throw all the *scraper things* down to you."

Day: 1522; Hour: 15

"Are you a vegetarian or something?"

The young Aurors had gone into the Muggle world on delivery runs, and it seems they loved them for completely different reasons than Hermione ever had - supplies. Toad, Allison, and Harry had come back with things like paint, nails, and shingles. Adam had different priorities, judging by the meat on the counter, and the beer in the fridge and in his arms as he headed outside.

The meat that is currently bleeding out of the package, and that makes Hermione think of a lot of things she shouldn't ever think about. But she had smelt the blood, and had looked down at it, and then she felt and remembered a lot of things that

weren't really distinguished. They just amounted to a lot of screaming in her head, and red-slicked skin, and broken voices, broken bodies, the dark, sulfurgasolinesweatinopenwoundsgreenfi--

"No." The word catches in her throat, and she coughs.

She remembers bodies exploding in front of her, the violent exposure of human mechanics as it ripped into the air and across the grass. Blood had sprayed out, filling the sky it felt like, and there had been a stench of burnt flesh as human insides squished under her boots.

"Are you okay?" The voice is distant, coming through a wall, and the blood runs into a crack in the counter, filling it up. "You look...a little green. I can cook it, you know. No big deal."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Hermione tears her eyes away, and realizes that they are wide and blurred when she looks up at the wall. She blinks, humming in her head. *Who told you so, dilly, dilly, who told you so?*

"--all the time," Hermione looks up at Allison when she realizes that she's talking. "They don't know how to cook. Men, really. I was the only one brought up in the Muggle world, too... I went to Hogwarts, but only until--"

"Yeah, you can cook if you want." It's hard to get the words out, but it's easier to concentrate on them. Words over images. Words over memories.

"Alright, great. Adam and Harry love my cooking, so I'm sure it'll be fine. Though, they are my best friends, Harry is my boyfriend, so they could be lying..."

Allison continues babbling as she searches the cabinets for something. Hermione watches her, the easy smile and the bright glow of red across her cheeks. That could have been her, or the three of them. Allison, Harry, and Adam. If she and Ron turned into something more than what they managed, and Voldemort died the first time, or back before the war really started. She wonders at how the world would have been then. How *they* would have been, without the weight that had been placed on their shoulders. That had bent their spines, cracked their bones, and threatened to bury them into the mud with every step they took. If they would have been just...whatever. Everything. Nothing. Just people in the world. Just Allison, Harry, and Adam, who laughed at things like silly faces and took advantage of a dark house by running around and screaming 'boo!', cackling as they ran away.

"Granger?" She looks up, pulling at the neck of her shirt, and Harry smiles at her.

"Can I talk to you for a second? Out here?"

"Of course." She skirts past him as he gives a saucy look to his girlfriend, but his face is more serious than is necessary when he faces her in the living room.

He hands her an envelope, familiar and routine. "You've been ordered to go to MH19, five tomorrow night."

Hermione blinks at him, at his whisper and the serious look he gives her. "Is that it?"

Harry pulls back, his head cocking to the side and his eyes rolling up like he's trying to yank thoughts of his head or hear something she can't. "Uh…yeah?"

"Is it, or isn't it?"

He straightens up at her tone and nods. "Yes, it is."

"Alright, then."

She suddenly feels very claustrophobic, and the hammering is too loud above her head, and there's a bead of sweat sliding down her nape. She just needs some fresh air, she needs to not think, she needs to get *out*. She gives a nod to the Auror in front of her and then turns for the front door, dashing out across the grass, the sticks and rocks hurting her bare feet. She doesn't really notice, disappearing into the tree line. She runs until all she can hear is her breath in her ears.

Day: 1522; Hour: 16

Draco stares at her as she emerges from the trees, his face hard despite the redness of heat, his clothes still sticking to him with sweat, and a hammer dangling from his hand. She nods at him, his body too tense at the edge of the roof. He doesn't relax, and she spots Harry a little further back and to the side, just as tense. It makes her look over her shoulder, clenching her wand as she shoves her hair back from her face. The wind whips it right back, but she doesn't see anything. She glares at them for making her paranoid, and she can feel their eyes until she walks through the front door.

Day: 1522; Hour: 17

She helps Allison cook dinner, and when the men saunter in to make their plates, she feels strangely domesticated. She frowns at the sensation but Allison is

laughing, kissing her boyfriend on his sweaty neck and wiping the paint off his cheek. She takes a seat at the small kitchen table, and stares too long at the steak before taking a bite. Draco sits down across from her, shooting a weary look at the other open seat, and rolling his head along his shoulders.

His legs stretch out under the table, invading her foot space like they usually do. He's all sweaty, and shiny, and slick, his shoulders angled in a slump she recognizes as his exhaustion. His wand is tucked behind his ear, and she stares at it a little too long, shaking the memory out of her head. She flicks her eyes to his over the rim of his glass, startled by the heat there, and glaring at the hint of knowing and amusement that comes with it.

"Lavender?" He glances at her plate, lifting his chin toward her.

She pauses and then smiles, Harry giving them a questioning look as he takes the last seat. "No, so far."

"What?" Harry asks, tearing into the potatoes in a way that would make Ron beam in pride.

"Lavender is a horrid cook," Hermione explains. "Even her pancakes aren't for the weak-stomached."

"Ah, yeah. Even her eggs!" Harry exclaims, his eyes wide as his shoulders pull back. "How hard is it to make eggs? How do you botch that? It had this weird aftertaste."

"Hey, Harry! I think the Ministry should give us the house after this, don't you think? We could all live here after the war." Toad grins, and throws his arm around the other Harry, palms up toward the ceiling. "Not a bad idea, right?"

A very bad idea, she figures. Though the house is shaping up remarkably well. It's amazing what some paint and a fixed roof can do. The place had been in ruins, falling apart more with every storm that passed. It's brighter now, more alive, and it no longer makes her want to huddle in on herself.

"Er... I already have a house."

"Oh. Well, that sucks. You're definitely going to be Twatter now, ruining our chances like that."

Harry winces, and then sends a look to Draco when the blond lets out a snort.

"You should hear what they call you, *Male-toy*."

Hermione snorts then, and Draco narrows his eyes at Harry, her, and then the five people shooting betrayed looks at Harry as they try to escape the room. "Wishful thinking? And I'm surprised that didn't wear out the astonishing lack of brain cells enough to never come up with that *enchanting* little rhyme. How did it go? The one about Granger's hair, the house falling down, and suffocation?"

Hermione glares, but there's a smile that tugs at her, because she's lived long enough with her hair to not be offended anymore. She *knows* the thing looks horrid today, with the heat and paint, and there might even be a leaf somewhere in there. The insults round the kitchen, until they are yelled through laughter and half-chewed food. When Adam says something about Allison's babbling, Hermione's own laugh makes a break up her throat the moment she is swallowing. It sounds off in an odd choke-gasp-wheeze-snicker that has Harry and Draco both laughing at her. She swallows, coughs, and laughs with them, her face red as she memorizes the lines of their wild grins.

She wonders if it might be like this, after the war. Because she thinks she can fix a hundred houses with them, to have them both with her, and for the feeling that comes over her then. Content, almost. A little content, a little happy, and mostly at peace with the moment, if only for a moment. Yes, a hundred more houses, at least.

Day: 1523; Hour: 8

"You're terrible at painting. Despite its simplicity, I'm not surprised. You're the one who did the bathroom off the kitchen, then?"

She gives a jump at his voice behind her, and then inspects the wall, glaring at the streaks she missed. She had woken up that morning with an almost frantic need to paint the bedroom before she left, and despite that she still has time, the frantic feeling transferred to the quality of her job. The war is coming back at her, despite the curious edge she had been walking the past few days, and it is somehow extremely important to finish the room. She doesn't know why, but she knows she isn't likely to return to this house again, and it *has* to be done by the time she leaves.

"You're terrible at making false insults, despite the simplicity. And no, I didn't do that bathroom."

"Are you going somewhere?" Because it doesn't take much to see that all her clothes are gone from their scatter across the floor, and her slippers are packed.

"Yes, I have to go to Headquarters tonight." She glances at him as she dips her brush in the paint can. He watches her, another brush in his hand.

"If you're done by tomorrow, go back to Headquarters. Tell Lupin I want you for the run. Make sure you get an authorized paper from him too, or they won't let you back into my house." *My house*. She is surprised he still thinks of it like that, though she shouldn't be. He grew up there, the Ministry and Order were likely to give it back after this - of course it is his.

"I'm aware of protocol, Malfoy," she drawls in a way that might mean she's been hanging around him too much. "Run?"

He smirks, probably because she's scowling, and she has to work to stop scrunching her nose up. "You'll see."

"Fantastic," she mutters, though she's partly satisfied in knowing she'll be busy the next few days. She doesn't want to wait around for the war to be over, she wants to see it herself. She wants to stand there, and look at it, and watch it die right in front of her.

"Are you trying to get high on paint fumes?" Draco throws the windows open at the other side of the room, and she can feel the wind against her back three seconds later.

Sometimes it's easy to forget the way the world should smell until you're in fresh air. It suddenly becomes so much easier to breathe.

The house is finally losing the mold stench, thanks in part to the lack of rain last night. After dinner the group of them had gone outside, cooling down from the day. The wind had become cold, and there had been a feel to the air that meant rain. They had watched the clouds gather over the trees, and the shocks of lightning and distant thunder, but the storm never reached them.

"Hermione?" She turns toward Harry in the doorway. "I made breakfast, and everyone refuses to eat it until you do."

"Why?"

"Because they figure I won't kill my best friend."

She huffs a laugh, sending a longing look toward the unfinished wall. "I've never seen you cook before."

"I was like Wolfpack, or whatever his name is. It was brilliant. You would have been in awe."

She pauses, narrowing her eyes at him. "You burnt it, didn't you?"

"It's flavorful."

Day: 1523; Hour: 9

She and Draco paint in silence. It's almost therapeutic, the swishes of their paintbrushes and the repetitive sweeping motion. She's still very much aware of him, though, like she always is when he's near her. She peeks at him, but it's just the back of him, and his fingers wrapped around the brush. She still tracks the length of his shoulders, the fabric of the shirt that moves and sometimes clings, the movements of his wrist. He takes longer than he should whenever he dips the brush into the can in the middle of the room, and she thinks that he might be watching her too.

"I am Captain Twat, and I here declare that there shall be no more purple!" The voice somewhere down the hall is followed by laughter throughout the house.

Even over breakfast, hungover and pleasantly surprised at Harry's cooking, they had laughed like everything they saw in life was the funniest thing ever. She doesn't think she's ever heard so much laughing in a safe house before. If she has, she can't remember. Maybe when Fred and George were running around with their pockets full of tricks, their minds busy plotting, and those devious, playful grins. Maybe when she still thought the war would be over in a year, and there hadn't been more than a handful of deaths. When she had never killed another person, Draco Malfoy was locked up in a cell somewhere, and the worse she knew of the world were still things she read about.

They laughed so easily. Their whole attitude toward life was carefree, like it wasn't hard for them at all. The lights went off and they played a game. Hermione dropped a pot, and they didn't even jump. They didn't look to check who was coming down the hall when the floor squeaked, they didn't close their windows at night, they weren't afraid of anything. They didn't know the war at all. They had gone through their training, and they had been shipped off to a safe house two weeks ago, running deliveries. All they knew of the war were sealed folders, Muggles, a run down house, and a casualty list that didn't make sense.

"You look like you just ate a vomit Bean, Granger."

Her head snaps to her right so fast her neck cracks. He gives it a look, dropping the paint can next to his feet and nudging it an inch in her direction. "I do not. I was just thinking about the Aurors."

"Ah."

"Ah?" He stares at her. "No one says ah without meaning something else. They always mean, 'ah, so I was right', or--"

"You're bitter."

"*What*?"

He looks at her like she told him they were painting their room orange, making her fingers twitch in threat. "You're bitter because they don't have to face the war. Or, if they do, not much of it."

"No--"

"You're angry, Granger, though I don't think you'll ever admit it. They didn't have anything taken away from them. No friends, no family…their selves. They act like it isn't a big deal, and that pisses you off. They're relatively untouched by the war, and might even remain that way, and--"

"You're wrong. I'm glad they haven't had to be a real part of the war. I'm happy they haven't had to…that they don't have to *know* it. No one should have to know it."

"Maybe, but you're still jealous. A little angry, Granger, and you'll be angry for a long time. We all will. We're all pissed we had to be the ones to do this. That it was us who had to lose everything, and live with this, or die with this. We have that right. Earned it, even."

"I'm proud of… I'm not proud of everything I've had to do, but I know that in ten years, I'll look back and be proud that I had been a part of bringing peace to this world. I won't ever be happy about the sacrifices, or…or a lot of things. I'm not jealous--"

He curses, and he seems a little too angry with the look he throws her. "Do you stockpile bullshit?"

"Excuse--"

"If you feel it, *say it*. You always give these resp--"

"Just because I don't feel the way you do, or the way that you're trying to say I do, doesn't mean--"

"--than-thou facade! Your never ending justice crusade, and making--"

"--to even say that! Just because you don't like my answer doesn't--"

"--the answer people want to hear, instead of the honest one that you actually *feel* . You--"

"--whole... You can't tell me how I feel! You--"

"Tell me it doesn't disturb you then. Tell me, swear to God, *promise* me, that you haven't been *disturbed* by them, and their ignorance--"

"Oh, seriously, Malfoy, like--"

"*Tell me*! Tell me, honestly, that you have not once thought about what it would be like if you could have been in their shoes instead. Tell me you didn't imagine how different they would be if they did the things you did. Tell me you never wished you hadn't ever been a part of this war, or that you--"

"Shut *up*!"

"Because I'm not going to tell you what I think is the *right* answer, instead of the one I feel? Because I'm *right*? You--"

She snorts. "That's the same--"

"--I feel it, Potter feels it, anyone who has been a part of this war *feels it*. There's nothing wrong with that, Granger. We're human beings, no one asks for--"

"It doesn't matter if I've thought it! It doesn't change the fact that I'm glad they haven't had to go through bad things, or that I'm not proud for fighting in this war, regardless of what that fighting has had to--"

"Then just--"

"Beer, anyone?" They both swivel to the yelled question in the doorway, spotting Toad with half his face purple, and grass in his ruffled, black hair.

Hermione's eyes widen, and there's a coldness in her throat with the breath she takes it. She steps forward, her hand waving like it could brush away everything that was said. "It's not like that at--"

"Hey, I get it. I mean...mate. I *get it*. I read the obituaries. I read the newspapers, and listen to the Wireless, and I see you three. I don't want to be you. But we would have been, willingly, if we could have been. You know? All I'm saying."

Toad puts the two beers down and walks out without another word. Draco has relaxed the rigid lines of his anger when he swaggers past her in his usual gait, shoving the trunk against the door as he closes it. The bottles clink together when he picks them up, twisting off the caps, and he offers her one at an arm's distance.

"Now we offended him." She thought it was better to say we instead of just him.

"I'm brokenhearted."

"Jerk," she mutters, grabbing the offer and taking a sip. She would give...well, she didn't really have much to give, but she could really go for a Butterbeer right now. Or better, the hot chocolate her gran makes.

"You always say that like it's a surprise."

She mutters to herself, sounds that don't form words but that she knows he'll take offensively. She twists the bottle around in her hands, watching the paint come off in the cool sweat on the glass. She picks at the label, and then glances up at him, standing there like he's waiting for something. "I'm not proud of being bitter, you know."

"You'll get used to it."

She huffs. "Comforting." He shrugs the shoulder on the same side of his raised eyebrow as a response. "I meant what I said. I don't wish they had it worse. I only wish that we had it better. Sometimes...well, sometimes I wish none of us were in the war, because there never was one. And sometimes I wish I could go away. But those are the really weak, stupid seconds. Usually I just wish there was never a war, and if there was one, that it could have been better for us. That it could have been...easier. That, even after all these years, it could have been so easy that we could still be...like them."

"If you enjoyed all this, I would think you were more twisted than my a-- than a Death Eater. I'm talking the booby hatch..." He trails off at her snort, but she always

found that term extremely amusing. She blames it on prolonged exposure to Ron. "Booby ha... Pervert. Do you have the maturity of a--"

"Oh, please!" She gives him an incredulous look, flicking her paintbrush at him. "Pot, kettle."

He blinks at her as she smirks, reaching up a slow hand to brush his fingers over his cheek. He pulls them back, looking down at the blue on his fingertips from the paint she splattered there. All she can see is the twitch back of his shoulder and then his paintbrush is there, sliding down the front of her face. It's too late for a reaction, but she jerks back anyway, tripping over her feet as beer sloshes out over her hand.

She sputters, sticking out her tongue at the taste of paint in her mouth, and he breaks into laughter in front of her. "Tahic!" she exclaims over her tongue, spitting into the beer.

"If you didn't want the beer, you could have just told me."

She glares at him, setting the bottle on the floor as she steps forward. The handle of her brush smacks off his as he blocks her attack, and paint flicks out at them. Attack, block, attack, block, attack, block. Little specks of blue decorate his face and shirt, though it doesn't stop him from smirking at her. She glares harder, inching her foot forward and stepping on his toes when she blocks his attack. He grunts, she grins, and her brush colors his nose blue.

She can't stop the cackle that wells up inside of her, and it throws her off enough for him to grab her wrist. She tugs it back, but his hand slips up to the brush and yanks it from her grasp. She has just a second to be surprised before she registers the purr of triumph in his throat, and the two brushes in his hands. She squeaks and spins, knocking over the beer as she bolts forward. It soaks through her socks and she slips over the wood floor on her dash toward the paint can.

He grabs her by the back of her shirt, yanking her back with the help of her traitorous slick socks. He lets go of her shirt, his arm snapping around her a second later, and she lunges herself toward the can. Her feet slip back, and both of them lurch forward. She gasps when her journey to the ground is cut off by his arm around her middle, his paintbrush poking her in the ribs. His laugh is deep and evil above her when he moves them forward a step, and her face hovers over the paint can.

"Admit defeat," he orders. Wanker. Like she doesn't have control of her arms or

something.

"Never," she breathes, dipping her hand into the pool of sky blue and flinging it back toward his voice, grinning when she smacks against the top of his bent head.

She rubs her hand into his hair, bracing her hand on the floor in preparation of him dropping her, but he yanks them upright instead. She's only slightly aware of him dropping the paintbrushes as his arm leaves her, and he moves around her, his palm on her chest shoving her against the wall. Her breath rushes out, and she thinks her eyes cross for a second before focusing on his face. He's scowling at her, his face freckled in paint, his nose covered, and half his hair blue and in every direction. She presses her lips together at the glint in his eyes, but the laughter comes anyway, shoving itself out from her chest until her shoulders are shaking with it.

The hard edge disappears from his face, replaced by the silky smugness he gets when he feels playful. It comes when it's a good playful and a mean playful, and it's taught her to be cautious. He reaches up to the wall next to them, and then the same hand comes down to her face. She can feel the wetness on his finger against her cheek, and his grin is evil when her laughter fades into comprehension.

"Cheater!" The wall is still wet, which means the entire back of her, pressed against it, was just covered in a layer of paint. She can practically *feel* it now, sticking to everything, her hair some huge, knotted tangle of blue.

"Hardly. Calling people cheaters just means you're a sore loser, Granger."

"Unless they really did *cheat*." She huffs at him when she tries to move, but he presses his body tighter against hers, trapping her.

"It's impossible to cheat when there aren't any rules to the game." He grabs her hands from his chest, stopping her undetermined attempt to push him away.

"There were unspoken rules," she tells him stubbornly, flexing her hands in his when he presses the back of them against the wall over her head.

"Yeah?" His nose slides along the line of her jaw, no doubt painting it, and then the rim of her ear.

"Yes. Whatever Draco does to win is automatically against the rules, because I always win." He laughs against her neck, and she grins stupidly at the shaking of his shoulders against hers.

"I can't say I'm surprised," he murmurs, his lips tracking up her throat. "You've always had some twisted logic."

"You wear off on me." She earns a nip of his teeth for that, and at her shaky exhale, he settles his hips more firmly against her.

She nudges her chin into his temple and he lifts his head, his face more smeared, and she can only imagine what her skin looks like. She kisses the side of his mouth, and ducks her head when he moves to kiss her, bringing her lips up to his neck instead. He exhales heavily against her temple as her mouth forms paths along his throat and neck, and she secretly spells out 'cheater' in the swirls of her tongue. He rocks his hips into her, and drops her hands when she sucks the spot between his earlobe and jaw.

She edges into his shirt, pulling it up as her hands push up his chest. He grips the sides of her head, pulling her face toward his, and then exhales in an impatient rush from his nose when she bunches his shirt up around his arms and shoulders. Her stomach clenches, like it always does when he gets like this. Impatient to kiss her, touch her. It makes her feel lightheaded, that she could have that sort of effect on him. He grabs his shirt, jerking it over his head, and she watches gleefully as her palms spread paint over his chest. His shirt doesn't even hit the floor before his hands are back on her, bringing his mouth to hers.

His mouth is warm and tastes like beer and breakfast, which is a weird combination, but she likes it anyway. He breaks an urgency open inside of her with the press of his lips and tongue. Caresses turn into strokes, become squeezes and pulls, their mouths and bodies demanding more, and everything, and all at once. He catches her up in a whirlwind, until she can't breathe. Until her knickers are around her ankle, his pants around his own, and she's too aware of being consumed by him to notice the world of blue on their skin.

He slides out of her, kissing her when she glares in protest, and dropping her on her feet. "Turn around, Granger."

She gives a hesitant pause before doing so, and stiffens when he chuckles behind her, his hands running down her sides. His palms are too slick against her back and her bum, and she catches on when his hands travel up her stomach wetly. She probably looks like an alien from the back, covered in paint. He squeezes her breasts, pinching her nipples between his fingers, and his feet knock against her ankles.

"Hands on the wall."

She braces herself as he grabs her hips, his fingers slick and sliding as he tries to squeeze, spreading her legs more. His bites down into her shoulder at the same moment he plunges back into her, and she can't control the loud, guttural moan or the way her head snaps back against his shoulder. He sets a steady, fervent pace, and her feet slide against the floor, her breathing shuttering out as they both try to keep as quiet as possible. He sucks and kisses his way across her shoulder blades, her neck, and then just breathes hot and wet against her shoulder.

She reaches behind her, wrapping her hand around the nape of his neck, and her palm slides up, down, up on the wet wall with every snap of his hips. Sweat builds up along their skin, until everything is so slick she's afraid they'll fall away from one another with nothing steady to hold onto. Draco seems to have the same idea, or is just cramped from the position, and pulls out of her again. He smacks her hard on her backside, and she knows he's smirking before he even turns her back around. He kisses her, leading her across the room, their hands frantic.

His tongue is demanding for the three seconds it takes them to give back into panting, and he rests his forehead against hers as he walks her backwards. His eyes are an icy blue on hers, and she isn't sure if she somehow never noticed the shade before or if it was from the paint all around them. He looks good in their room, she decides. He fits perfectly, all white, blue, and grey, and perfect.

He bites her lip before pushing her backwards, and she looks at him in shock before her back hits the mattress. He huffs a laugh, or exhales really hard, and crawls up her body as she crawls back. "I think this might be a win-win situation."

He pauses at her statement, maybe because of what she said or because she isn't one to form complete sentences in the middle of sex. He grins wickedly then, his hand burning up her thigh before he pulls her leg over his hip and buries himself inside her again. She arches under him, clamping her legs around him, and fists the sheets on a gurgle of noise from both of them. Thrust, thrust, *grind*, thrust, grind, *thrust*, thrust, and she's gasping for oxygen in the heat of him.

"*Fuck*. I could shag you for hours...but you already know that, don't you?" he pants out against her ear, and she only catches muttered words as he bends his head for her chest. Something about 'skin', 'tits', and 'glove', before she grabs the back of his head and pushes his mouth against her chest, shutting him up.

He laughs, but obliges, and she digs her fingertips over the contracted muscles in his back and shoulders. Sometimes, she has moments where the world around her makes sense. When she looks at him against her body, and how well they blend into the world around them, like everything is meant to be exactly the way it is. The

tempo of her heart matches his, the speed of his hips, the squeak of the mattress, his tongue, her breath, the wave of pressure building inside of her. Sometimes, for just a moment, it all clicks.

He rolls them over, so her knees are digging into the mattress instead of her heels in his skin, and he grins up at her. His moods ranged in sex, though he is always intense and passionate. Sometimes he will be demanding, rough, dark, and almost scare her with the way he looks at her. Other times, he's slow, soft, and he'll hardly look her in the eye at all. She enjoys both, everything between, but there's certain things she loves. Like this, the boyish grin that she's only ever saw here.

She braces herself on his chest, and he meets the wild bounce of her hips, his hands everywhere, like they aren't satisfied with being too small to reach every inch of her. She holds his eyes, watching them turn darker the closer she gets, until her breath is all gasps and grunts. He grabs her hips, pounding her harder onto him as her head falls back, the room dissolving around her until there is only sensation as the pressure breaks, explodes. She clenches the air into her throat and chest, but she groans through clenched teeth at the feelings that threatens her control of silence.

When she was thirteen, she had been swept under in the ocean, caught between the cresting of the wave and the undertow. It had thrown her and spun her, until she knew no sense of direction or anything besides the endlessness of water and the burning in her lungs. She feels like that now, but without the desperate hunt for oxygen, or the struggle to break free. She lets it take her, lets the force of it own her. It should probably scare her, how easily she gives in, but it's so much better when a part of her mind isn't worrying about the face she makes, or what he's thinking, or the dangers outside the door, or anything that tries to keep her floating instead of drowning.

She gasps for air as Draco rolls them over again, and her eyes open to his. He kisses her, hard and quick, before he pulls to the side, his cheek sliding against hers. She wraps her legs around him again, raising trembling fingers to sink through his hair. The force of his hips is so strong that he moves them across the bed, her head dangling off the edge and her hands grasping his head before he tightens up above her, and the wave takes him too.

She drifts a hand down his back with a kiss to his ear as he finally lets out a shuddering breath. He crumbles from the statue, melting against her with a tremble as she closes her eyes and fingers his hair.

"I like the blue," she says with a rasp to her voice and a nod of her head. He pants

out a laugh, squeezing his arm tighter around her.

Day: 1523; Hour: 11

She paints what's left of the last wall in the room, wrapped in a white sheet stained blue, while Draco lies naked, watching her from the bed. Their bodies had left some caveman painting on the wall: a big blob of smeared paint, a streak where her head had rubbed the paint away, and then their hand prints, his larger ones above hers. She doesn't paint over it. She doesn't know why, but he doesn't say anything. *Wait until it dries*, she offers, and he shrugs.

Day: 1523; Hour: 13

"You're leaving me *alone* with them?" Harry whispers, and a chorus of hurt feelings break out around them.

"I'll see you in a couple days, I'm sure."

"I'm in more fear for myself," he whispers again, and the Aurors laugh, but she knows it's a lie.

"I'll be fine. I'm always fine." Draco snorts and she shoots a glare at him.

"Are you coming back here?" Allison asks, looking hesitantly at the room full of men.

"You know you can always girl talk with Adam." Toad tries to be comforting, and receives a punch in the arm for gratitude.

Hermione had apologized to him after her long, scrubbing shower, but he had brushed her off with a laugh. That was until she followed him and drove her point in about how much she appreciated his effort, and his service, and...that was about the point he told her to calm down, it was 'aces', and escaped out the back door. She is assuming 'aces' meant fine, by context.

"I doubt I'll be back. And, in case I don't see you guys again, it was a pleasure to meet you. Allison, Adam, Harry, Justin," she only gives a slight grimace before, "Toad."

"Hey, you too."

"It was nice to--"

"--and all."

"--had fun."

"--we'll see you again."

"His name is Sam."

Hermione's polite smile falters when her eyes flash back to Harry. "What?"

The room turns silent, and she can see Draco straighten up in his observation of the contents of the fridge. "That's not Justin. His name is Sam."

"Oh." Her heart drops, an icy, prickly feeling taking up home where it had once been. She can feel the heat flash into her face, and her fingers tangle together in front of her as she looks over at J-- Sam. "I am so sorry."

She can't believe she has been calling him Justin this entire time. He had never corrected her. Neither had Allison, or Toad, or Draco. She might have even said it in front of someone else too. They probably thought she was crazy or something. Why else wouldn't they bother correcting her?

"It's not a big deal." Sam shrugs, grinning at her. "I like Justin way more than Sam anyway."

Harry gives her a faint smile, pulling her into a hug. "He reminds me of Justin, too," he whispers. "Be safe."

She doesn't mean to inhale so hard at these words, but she does, coughing over Harry's shoulder. It was the smile. It was the easy feeling, and the kind eyes, and maybe she is losing her mind. Just a little. Maybe it is the constant unknowing of what tomorrow will have for her that makes her search for the familiar and name them as things she knows. Maybe she just misses him, and it can't be an active thought to realize you're calling a man the name of your dead friend. Maybe that's okay.

Except it's not, because everyone is staring at her, and coming to conclusions, and she's angry on top of the embarrassment. No one corrected her, and she unknowingly exposed part of that weakness inside of her. The place where she keeps the things that hurt, and tries to hide them from the eye of war. A place all human beings have, because there is always a pain we keep to ourselves -- an enemy who knows our soul but not our name, and you can't let something like that free or it

will destroy you unless you destroy it first.

She blinks furiously at the blur in her vision, and gives three pats to Harry's back before pulling away. "Well, I'll see you soon."

He looks confused, and then something else that she looks away from too soon to register. She gives a nod to the room and walks back to her and Draco's room, her feet clunky and the strange burning in her chest slow to fade. *Let the birds sing, dilly dilly, and the lambs play*, she hums. She's probably leaving for a mission tonight or in the morning. It isn't time to think about anything but that.

She pulls her holster on, sliding her wand into its spot, and runs her hands down the wrinkles in her dark attire. Black cloak, and she secures it around her, flipping up her hood at the sound of the rain outside. It might be raining in Wiltshire as well, and the Portkey will be taking her outside the gates. Black boots, and she pulls the laces tight and ties them, and they remind her, like they always do.

She double checks her pockets, feeling the outline of the coin in her left and her letters in her back pocket. The official order for her presence is tucked inside her cloak, for the sake of the Aurors outside the gates. She grabs her trunk and pulls it into the middle of the room, digging a ball of cloth out of her pocket.

"Forgetting something?"

She looks up at Draco, her orange Phoenix band hanging from his finger as he walks toward her. She can't read his expression, but his eyes don't waver from hers. "That's weird. It's never fallen off before."

"It has." She gives him a questioning look as she takes it, tying it tightly around her arm. In the beginning she used to tie it so tight her arm would go numb. "I remember you running after it before we infiltrated some building."

"I don't remember." She frowns, holding the cloth in her hand and pulling away the corners to reveal the bridge token serving as a Portkey. "Oh, wait… You almost got into a fight with Seamus. I think you guys pounded into one another in Moody's office after that."

He shrugs a shoulder as she rubs the cloth around the Portkey, and before any awkward silence happens or he steps away, she kisses him. It's a little sloppy, a lot rushed, but it's nice and warm and him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She's pretty sure this is the first time she's ever kissed him goodbye when they

weren't naked and one of them was leaving for a different bedroom. Except for the mission she went on to rescue Ron, but that had been a very different situation. She fumbles for the Portkey, and is gone before he says anything or she can even contemplate it.

Forty

Day: 1531; Hour: 4

It has been over a week since she left the safe house, and the eight days make her long for the broken down house before they even patched the roof. She spends her days patrolling the perimeter of *something*. Wards are placed around it, and she's careful not to edge too close. She isn't told if she is protecting it or minutes away from breaking into it, or even what *it* is.

She had come with a team that included Ron, but he had been taken to a different area. She's with Tonks instead, who supplied good company for three days and nothing else -- she has no idea what they're doing either. All they do know is that they are constantly on guard for an enemy or unfamiliar face, making them completely *twitchy* and jumpy, even in the shifts they take to sleep. Hermione has felt this level of paranoia all through war, but it kicks her in the gut after the ease of being in the safe house. It takes her two days before it feels natural to her, or at least natural enough not to make any stupid mistakes.

She and Tonks patrol the perimeter they were given, their backs to one another but sticking close together, back and forth, back and forth. It rains for seven of the eight days, and by the fifth she is thankful for it, having gone too long without a shower. The days are hot and damp, the bugs circling and biting constantly. She feels as if she has been stranded in a jungle.

The night is the worst, no magic allowed unless necessary, and the woods fill with the sounds of animals and the distant rampage of howling. Sometimes Hermione can feel it reflected off the inside of her chest, banging down into her gut. A sort of wildness that she understands, that the night had taught her somewhere back at her first dozen missions. It reminds her of apes in their cages, slamming against the bars. *Something is coming, and I'm ready, because I have no where else to go*.

They can't stop being afraid, no matter what they talk about or remember.

Day: 1531; Hour: 17

Tonks looks up at her, her hair tossed about her head in a mousy brown. "Everyone wants peace. They just want it in their own ways."

"I guess that's why we'll never have world peace. Even after the war, there will

still be those who want the world a different way."

"But as long as there is *enough* peace, as long as people aren't killing each other over beliefs... That's good enough for me."

"I think..." Hermione whispers, her fingers ghosting down rough tree bark as her eyes linger on the glimpse of sky through the trees. "I think that might be the closest we can come. And I think that's okay with me too. I'll be happy. With that."

Tonks is silent for five squelching steps, and both their heads jerk to the call of a bird from the trees. "There were a group of war protesters outside of the Ministry the other day."

"What?" Hermione pauses, and her boot sinks further into the mud.

That's all the ground is now. Mud, and slick mud, and thick mud, and deep mud, and more mud. Hermione and Tonks are both completely covered in it, and soaked from the rain. The wind rattles their bones, and both of them are sick. Today is cold, the season beginning to change, and Hermione can't help but be afraid of pneumonia.

"There's some who believe we could have made peace with...Voldemort, without the war. More have started coming because they think the war should be over now."

Hermione is pulled between two worlds. She never believed in war either, but she has learned that sometimes there is no other option. At the thought of people protesting, she is stuck between understanding and anger. She doesn't want the war either, but it's not like anyone had a choice. Here they were, fighting for their lives, while people were angry because they were *taking too long*. As if they wouldn't have just snapped their fingers and been done with it years ago. And were the lives of her friends, sacrificed for the sake of this war, nothing but a tragic mistake in a failure to *communicate* with the most powerful Dark Wizard of all time? This isn't about choice, or superficial sacrifice, it never was. It is about the value of life, the rights of humanity, and of a world that can be any sort of beautiful thing it wanted to be.

They will never understand. They will never grasp what has been seen, done, and felt while spinning wildly in the vortex of war. While standing wounded and afraid in the middle of a battle, while the screams ignite your blood and the only path to survival are brutal musts even if you felt you never could. They can't know that this is life, within war, and consequences they take to their graves. But they try to, she knows, and that's why they want it to end too.

She also understands the desire to have your family back at your side, or to look at the face of this beast that claimed their lives and want it gone forever. She understands the raw need for no more deaths and fear, and for a world washed anew. Since the Graveyard, mixed with all the other emotions that claim her, there is now an impatient rush to the pulse of her existence. As much as she tries to steady herself to the thought of another four years, every time she wakes, she thinks *is it today? Will it be today?* Hope is ugly, but she hates it as much as she clings her life to it, and she cannot blame them for trying, even if she knows they can't succeed.

Day: 1532; Hour: 5

She hasn't gotten more than two hours of sleep a night for five days. It is amazing, the sort of places you can fall asleep at when you're that tired. Though her paranoia makes her alert, when it is her turn to sleep, it leaves her in a cloud. Maybe it is because of the depth of her exhaustion, her trust in Tonks, or the fact that nothing has happened since they arrived.

She collapses against the tree, the bark scratching down her back. Her bum sinks into mud, her boots scraping it up like a blanket over her feet. The back of her head hits the tree as she watches Tonk's searching eyes for a couple seconds before she is lost to dark, dreamless sleep.

Day: 1532; Hour: 10

Tonks grinds her kneecaps into Hermione's thighs, her fingers pushing Hermione's arms into the mud with more force than she ever though the woman had in her. One moment Hermione had shivered, like she had a hundred times the past few days, and the next her body was shaking uncontrollably. She had fallen to the ground in jerks, as surprised by it as she had been the first time.

She closes her eyes to the desperate look twisting Tonks's face, trying to calm a part of herself she didn't know, and feels wetness wiggle at the corner of her eyes. "Cru-Cru--"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Tonks snaps, pressing her forehead to Hermione's and pushing the back of her head to the ground. There's a rock that digs sharply into the side of her neck.

"I-I--hope---"

"Sh, sh. It's alright, Hermione. Keep calm. It passes quicker."

Tears coat her eyeballs, and though they make her lashes heavy with wetness, they do not fall this time.

Day: 1532; Hour: 16

"I still can't believe they haven't told us what we're doing out here." Hermione scowls at the bag in her lap, and her dirt-stained hand when she grabs an apple.

Tonks grabs a few more crackers and zips her bag back up, looking just as weary as Hermione at their depleting food stock. "The less people know about anything, the better. You know that."

"Yes, but I'm not usually *this* uninformed when it comes to a mission."

"Usually," Tonks pauses to take a swig of water, the empty container refilled from the rain the night before, "the more important it is, the less we know. The only thing we *had* to know is what they told us. Just like every mission. They never give out more details than what we need. We keep an eye out for anything odd or someone not on our team, and dismantle the wards if the coin gets hot. Basics."

"Well, at least I always know if we're defense or offense."

Tonks grins as she stands, offering Hermione a hand up. She doesn't need it but she takes it anyway. "Who cares? We'll just take down anything ugly."

"I think we would be taking ourselves down then, at this point." Hermione is pretty sure there are things in her hair that she will never get out, and at least a dozen different layers of mud on different parts of her body. The rain had washed most of it off their bodies last night, but they were still dirty, and covered again a couple hours later.

Ironic, she sometimes thinks, when she's in a bed of mud. *Ironic*, when she pulls back dead shoulders to find a mask, and mud and blood covers her hands. *So ironic*.

"Hermione, you have to tell Rem--"

"I can't." She had known this was coming. She had hoped that it wouldn't, because this isn't over yet. Not for her, not for any of them.

"You have to. If you have a...an episode during a mission..."

"Arthur still--"

"That's different."

"How?" This comes out too much like a petulant child, and Hermione clenches her fists.

"Because we know his condition, along with most of everyone else who suff--"

"I'm not leaving this war, Tonks," Hermione whispers, but her voice is more steel than a plead. She can't leave this war. It is huge, but there is a part of it that is only hers to finish.

"You have to go through testing. The Guard and the Ministry will discuss the results, and if you're fit enough to keep going on missions, you'll be put on a list. The mission leaders might choose you, or they might not, but your condition has to be listed for the--"

"It's only happened twice."

"And it could happen again, any time. You could die. Your team members could--"

"I could Portkey out the second it comes--"

"A minute after, maybe. You would have to keep yourself calm while convulsing in the middle of a battle, get your hand in your pocket, and the Portkey out. A second counts, Hermione. A minute? That's--"

"My choice. I know that if my team members don't know about it--"

"Their reactions could be--"

"I don't want to go get tested, and have them tell me I can't go on missions, when I'm perfectly capable--"

"Then the test results will show th--"

"Tonks," she says, and now she can't keep the desperate edge from her voice. "Please. Please, you can't do this to me. You can't let them..."

There is a nervous tremble in her hands, and a ball at the base of her throat. She stops, turning to face the other woman, willing strength into the set of her bones. Tonks refuses to meet her eyes. *Deep breath, Hermione, calm down.*

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"No," she lies. If Tonks tells Lupin, she can't allow for Draco and Harry to get in trouble for their silence.

"Let me think about it, alright?" Tonks sets her jaw and her fingers run up, down, up her wand. "Twice in how long?"

"About two months." She should have said three, but Tonks might have traced it back.

Tonks gives a solid nod, then keeps walking.

Day: 1533; Hour; 6

"Ron," Tonks gasps out the split second after the wards fall.

Hermione automatically yanks her feet from where they have sunk in, like she has never walked a different way in her life, and turns. The bright red of blood stands out through the layers of brown and the pale white of his face, despite that even his hair looks maroon under the filth. Five Aurors rush forward from their meet-up point, and she pulls her arm out of one of their grips. Harold stays beside her, ignoring the demands to run forward now that the coin has been activated and the wards broken. Maybe it's some loyalty to Lavender, or to her after their rogue mission, or maybe because the man they had went on that mission to find is now standing in front of them marked in blood.

"Ron, are yo--"

"Wolf. James. Killed him."

"Are you injured?" Tonks rushes.

"Werewolf?" Harold asks.

"Werewolf," Ron pants with a nod, and clunks forward, grabbing Hermione's arm. "I'm fine. Let's go."

"Are you lying?" Hermione's voice is a little high when he pulls her forward, and the four of them begin to run.

"No, I'm fine. James... Brutal, bloody hell, it was..."

He drops her arm and Hermione reaches out to take his hand, ignoring the wetness. He still pulls it away from her, pumping his arms to move faster. The run is the hardest Hermione has had to endure. Past the wards are just more woods, more mud. With every slam of their feet, their boots sink down into the earth, and they have to wrench them out with every step. Her thighs and calves burn not two minutes later, and grunting accompanies the gasps for oxygen all around her.

The Aurors in front of them come to a sudden halt, and someone yells something she can't understand. Three of the Aurors disappear immediately, the other two following shortly after. Now that the line of Auror backs are gone, they can see Lupin's jolted run toward them. He looks clean but wild, and his face is pulled with the animal inside of him.

"Apparate back to Headquarters!"

"What?"

"We can't do--"

"--coin was activ--"

"--happened?"

"--was killed!"

"Now!" Lupin screams through their hesitancy, and they follow their orders with a single, booming crack.

Day: 1533; Hour: 16

The sky is a light purple and pink from the window of Draco's bedroom. A dead garden stretches out across the grounds below, a lake no longer shimmering in the twilight, and color is peeling from the gazebo. The grass is overgrown, and the trees are perfectly still in the quiet. It would be peaceful if she wasn't trying to get the knots out of her hair, and coming away with far too much hair in the brush.

She watches the sky turn to a deeper purple, the trees become black, and she counts the strokes of the brush so she doesn't have to think about anything else.

Day: 1534; Hour: 10

"I felt like I was getting punished with that mission," Ron groans, his heels

thudding against the overly-expensive looking coffee table.

"It was horrible. Ten days on the ground, in the mud and rain, with a cold--"

"And bad food," Ron throws in, making a face when she sneezes into a tissue.

She shoots him a glare, blowing her nose, and throws the tissue with the rest of the mountain in the rubbish bin. "I wonder why Lupin sent us back."

"He won't ever say."

"I know. McG--"

"Hey!" They both look up toward the grinning face of Harry in the doorway. "I was told I would catch death if I went looking for you two, but..." Harry trails off with a wince at the body-wracking cough from Ron.

"Oh, come on," Ron leans over her toward the bin to spit out the phlegm he just got up before continuing. "You know death can't catch you, Harry."

Hermione purses her lips at him, in part from his comment and because another sneeze was about to attempt dislodging her brain. She pulls a tissue from the box in front of her, waiting, waiting... Ron pushes himself further away from her when she sneezes again, just to sneeze himself.

"Uh... I think I'll sit..." Harry pushes a chair to the wall on the other side of the room, "here."

"Didn't you miss us?" Ron asks, and Hermione smiles, wiping her hand across her scorching forehead. She had been about to suggest Harry leave the room, but it feels too good. Ron is starting to come back into himself, and even told her that he only had to take his anxiety potion once during their stay in the forest. If Harry's presence helps that, she'll just try to breathe in the opposite direction.

"Hey, I'm risking it, aren't I?" Harry raises his eyebrows, gesturing toward her when she starts coughing.

"Gross."

"Oh, shut up."

Day: 1538; Hour: 8

She mostly sleeps for two days straight, her dreams fevered, and her body sweating through the sheets. She deals with her sickness in a daze, Harry forcing her tea and soup. Tonks joins the sick party long enough to complain, and inform Hermione that the next time the shaking started, she was to Apparate or Portkey to St. Mungo's immediately for testing. While it isn't something Hermione wants to do, she understands the need for it above her own selfishness. At least Tonks hadn't told Lupin, which surely would have put her behind a desk or something until she had another episode and could be tested properly. She doesn't think she can take a daily work schedule at P&P. The thought of it alone is ridiculous, and makes her anxious when she stands still.

On the fourth day, while reading a book to them, she falls asleep with Harry's head on hers and Ron hogging all the blankets. It tears open and fills something inside of her at the same time, and though they are gone from Headquarters the next morning, she feels better than she has in weeks.

Day: 1538; Hour: 14

She talks to McGonagall for three hours about charms, transfiguration, and the history of Hogwarts. They share tea, stories, and a common need to communicate about something other than the war. Her old professor considers her opinions, begins debating with her, and insists upon being called Minerva. Hermione is struck with the thought that maybe she's passed that elusive line between thinking she's an adult and adults recognizing her as such. It makes her feel brittle and triumphant at the same time, and she has no idea why.

"I have to admit, it would be amusing." Prof- McGo-- Minerva - and it sounds strange and disrespectful in her head - smiles, and pours another cup of tea.

"Oh, yes. A couple dozen twenty-somethings strolling into Hogwarts in our House uniforms. It would make an interesting final year."

"To say the least. Of course, when Hogwarts reopens, we will welcome back any students who wish to return. I'm sure the favorable option will be to complete your N.E.W.T.S through the Ministry."

Hermione smiles to herself, stirring in her sugar, and making sure not to hit her spoon off the sides. "I have to admit, the idea of returning to Hogwarts is very alluring. It was...home... But I'll be going through the Ministry, once I study properly."

She wants to go back to Hogwarts so badly she can taste it in her throat - bitter

and bubbly, sweet and tart. No matter what prejudices she had to fight there, or dangerous times with her best friends, or how much she missed her parents at times, there was no other place in the world where she could walk through the front doors and *know* she belonged there. That sense of proper placement, of destiny, wonder, youth, contentment, and *hunger* for *everything* was mirrored nowhere else. The idea of returning to Hogwarts is like the idea of going home after several horrible, wandering years.

But she knows that those years have changed a lot of things. Even if she did return to Hogwarts, it would never be the same. She has gone through too much to feel naughty sneaking out past curfew, too old to not feel ridiculous in general. There would be no rowdy celebrations as Harry recounted catching the snitch, the weight of a heavy book bag would no longer be comforting, the absent faces in the Common Room would sing louder than the lullabies she hummed, and Lavender wouldn't care about who was snog-- okay, maybe not that far. The point is that it's the past, and no matter what, she can never get it back again. Hard and heavy to swallow, she no longer belonged at Hogwarts.

It's what it gave her that she longs for now, but she'll never find it there. The past is something that you miss, and not something you get back. The only thing in life that doesn't change is the fact that everything changes.

"We will have a few teaching positions open." Minerva pauses to take a sip, her eyes bright and trained on Hermione over the rim of her cup. "If your interest sways you back to Hogwarts upon completion of your N.E.W.T.S, the doors are open for you." The older woman gives Hermione an affectionate look that makes her miss her mother and her chest tremble. "As well as mine, no matter the path you choose."

She's not sure if it pushes her back over the elusive line or not, but she doesn't care, when she reaches across the small table and hugs her old professor. A surprised *oh* is muffled in her hair, and thin hands press to her back. Teaching at Hogwarts is not something she has ever considered or even knows if she would do at this point. What she does know is that she's happy in this moment, and she's learned not to pass that up.

Day: 1539; Hour: 7

She feels good. She feels *really* good, and becomes slightly aware of the world on a moan, floating between that cozy, dreamy area of sleep and wakefulness. Something is...is that...what the... Hermione's eyes snap open to dull morning light, blond hair at the edge of her vision, and a very familiar back moving in a very familiar way. Her hand slaps against her face, she moves them so quickly, rubbing

her eyes and moaning when Draco starts thrusting harder. *What are you doing, how did I sleep through the beginning of this, this is a little rude, don't you think?* combine into a gurgle of weird noise.

She grunts, trying to get her bearings, and there's a soft, cool breeze against her that brings the scent of...roses? Flowers, and birthday bouquets, and first dates. His hand skims down her stomach as he lifts his head from her neck, and she gasps in pleasure and fear at the same time. The sound brings his eyes to hers from some spot on her shoulder, and his expression is blank. His eyes don't even convey the passion and lust she usually finds there, but some cool, aloof semblance of need in a way only he could pull off.

"Draco?" she rasps, and her fingertips brush down his cheek as his eyes dart back to her shoulder. "What..."

There are streaks of dirt and blood on his face, his shoulders, and a splatter of dried blood on his chest. The sun peaks out from clouds or trees, and the room brightens, birds chirping to one another outside of the open window. There's a huge bruise across his shoulder and upper arm, spreading down across his collarbone, but she can't see any open wounds. Her fingers are shaky when she reaches up, ghosting fingers down his cheek and through his dirty hair.

His hips speed up, his jaw clenching, and his fingers digging violently into her skin and the sheet beside her shoulder. She wishes he would just stop for a moment, but she knows he won't, that maybe he can't. Her thumbs move gently along his cheekbones, tugging his face toward hers. He gives into the pressure of her worry and kisses her, hard, their teeth clinking and his tongue plunging into her mouth. The headboard pounds against the wall with his movements, and she lifts her lazy legs to wrap around him.

She grabs the nape of his neck and the wrist next to her, smelling the richness of dirt and tasting the metallic scent of blood. She tastes her own then, yelping past the breathy sounds of her pleasure when his teeth sink into her bottom lip. He groans, swiping his tongue against it, again, again, the rasp of his taste buds and then the suction of his lips. He reaches a hand down to rub at her furiously, and when she squirms and pushes her hips away from the roughness of his fingers, he calms them, the gentleness a strong contrast to the rest of him.

Despite her confusion, fear, and worry, she can't help the pleasure that washes over her. She gasps and moans against his mouth, knotting her fingers in his hair and yanks, pushes, yanks. She bites the tip of his tongue as he pulls away, grinding herself against him. When she moves to enter his mouth, he forces her back,

claiming hers again with a growl.

He shoves his arm under her hips, angling her, and she lets go of his wrist to palm the headboard in an effort to keep her head from smashing against it. He grabs her hip hard enough to leave bruises, and his head drops to her shoulder, biting into her skin as he pulls tight above her. Her breath comes in heavy and hot, burning down her throat as she looks up at the ceiling with wide eyes. She loses rhythm with him as his thrusts grow erratic, and he groans hard and deep through his teeth and against her skin.

He collapses on top of her moments later, his breath rushing, and everything relaxed. She takes a shaky breath, uncurling her fingers to grasp the back of his head, and her palm drops from the headboard. His lips brush softly against the sore spot on her shoulder, and he's asleep before she even turns her head to look at him. She blinks slowly, and strokes his hair.

Forty-One

Day: 1539; Hour: 17

It started in the library, after he had awoken and showered, and the look on his face promised a lot more than conversation. She knows he won't talk about it, that he needs to disappear, for whatever happened to stop flashing through his mind. She knows he needs her, and so she does the one thing she's learned from him that can make her forget an entire world.

She had returned the fire of his kisses, but hadn't allowed her hands to move. His smirk proved he could see through her stillness and silence, and that he knew the half-hooded look on her flushed face too well to be fooled. His body became a weapon; his hard-earned knowledge of hers formed a solid plan. She had dug her fingers into her hips when he finally buried his face between her thighs, breaking silence. When she finally broke stillness, reaching forward to grab his head, to push, and thrust, and have him where she needed him most, it still felt like she won.

When he had stood, bunching her skirt up around her hips and grinding himself against her on moans, she had pushed his hands away and led him toward his bedroom. Well, to a series of hallways before getting completely lost, and he had snorted at her and led her there himself. He was confused, in the space of his bed, when she refused the arch of his hips and his determined steering of her body.

She doesn't know if there is a spot on his body that her hands or mouth do not travel across, burning paths and exploring each inch of him. She discovers new things, like his strange fondness for her tongue between his fingers, and that he hates her touching the back of his knee. He's ticklish when she brushes her lips over his hipbone, curls his toes with her hot breath on his perineum, and gurgles spit when she hums around him. He squirms in a good way when she sucks right beneath his bellybutton, and in a bad way when she kisses the corner between his arm and chest.

She greets all the places she knows cause a reaction, and she meets every new place too. She memorizes the sounds and movements he makes, and tells him she will have to do it again soon to remember them all. She pushes him away and down every time he tries to regain control. Whenever his questing hands are too close to distracting her, she pushes them away too.

She barely manages to escape one time, her senses coming back a second after

he has rolled them over. She grabs her wand in determination, and has him on his back with his hands bound to the headboard before he can blink twice. She had been surprised at her own audacity, the fuel of her determination to break him like he had her so many times, and had stared at him in embarrassment for several seconds. It was the hard glint in his eyes, the hitch of his eyebrow, and the short-lived smirk that had her dropping her wand. She had fondled herself as retribution, an inch above him while she blushed and they glared at one another.

He made promises, growled and hissed, and then desperate. He promised her how good he would make it for her, how hard she would get off, how loud she would scream, how crooked she would walk. Then, he promised her days of being trapped in his bed, he told her she better hope he didn't break through the ropes, he promised revenge, and brinks of insanity. She touched, squeezed, sucked, bit, licked until he couldn't form his promises anymore. Until he could only force a word or two out between the sounds of his pleasure, the wild bucking of his hips, the rattle of the headboard as he fought to break his binds.

Finally, finally, *finally*, his body shaking under hers, the rough, carnal growling broke from his throat to form words. "Please. *Please*, Hermione."

He sounds as pained as he does desperate, and she grins triumphantly. She had been afraid she wouldn't be able to make him do it. She had been fearing some embarrassing situation, where she would be forced to untie him and let him have at it, because there was no way he could want her enough to beg. She had been imagining a roll of his eyes, or laughing, or that look he gives her when she says something that doesn't match up with the level of her intelligence.

His words repeat over and over in her head. The tone of his voice, the fierce look on his face, the bounce of his body, his fingers curling into fists. All of it, for her. She drove him to this point of incoherency, of crazed lust, of abandon. She's seen him lose control, has made him lose it, but this is different. There is something strong and comforting, powerful and beautiful about it.

Five. Just five times she sinks him into the heat of her, and he's screaming his release. His face is twisted into both pain and pleasure, and the flying, joyful feel of her win begins to cloud into guilt. She stills, gnawing her lip at the contorted face in front of her, slow to relax. She's almost afraid to take him out of his binds, but she does, his arms hitting the bed lifelessly. She grows more worried the longer his body twitches and trembles, and his eyes stay shut.

"Fuck." All rasp, like his voice was dragged over gravel.

"Are...you okay?" She flinches at the smallness of her voice.

One grey eye opens to the world, meeting hers, and the other flutters open as she bites harder on her lip. "You're going to pay for that."

"I'm sorry, I--"

An eyebrow comes up, and his eyes are still dark on hers. "Oh, now you're sorry?"

She looks down at her wringing hands on top of his stomach. "I don't know why I did that. Well, I--"

"You know exactly why you did it." She looks up at the amusement in his voice. "Did you like hearing me beg, Granger?"

She sniffs, raising her nose at him. "I can see why you like for me to so often."

He laughs, low and hoarse, and it almost sounds like a cough. "Why the hell do you look so upset?"

"I don't look upset," she snaps, defensive because it's easier. "You looked like you were in pain, and I didn't mean for tha--"

"That's the first time anyone's ever done that to me," he confesses, and her eyes flash to his. "Next time I know not to let myself hold out so long."

He looks at her at like she's ridiculous, and he reaches up to draw circles above her knees. It *is* a bit ridiculous to be worried, she thinks. After all, it had been *his* choice, hadn't it? At any time he could have given in and did what he must have known she wanted. If he refused to, he could have told her no. She laughs at the thought of being such a wanton hussy he would have had to tell her no to stop her efforts. She imagines Draco with an affronted look, covering himself indignantly, and laughs harder.

She opens her eyes when he grabs her hands from his stomach, pulling her forward until she's lying on top of him. His eyebrows are raised, his expression curious as he drops her hands to plunge his fingers into her hair. He stares at her grinning mouth until her laughter fades, and then meets her eyes.

"What?"

"Nothing."

He hums, a hand dropping to ghost down the curve of her back, and smack her bum. "That was very naughty, Granger. I was almost certain you would give up, but you proved a formidable opponent. I didn't know you had it in you. All the same, battle and not the war, hm? I believe I promised revenge."

"Dish best served cold?" she asks weakly, and his grin is wolfish.

"Well, I could always get ice."

Day: 1540; Hour: 11

Colin pulls as tight and hard as a wall when she rounds the corner, and hops to the side like he was riding a pogo stick when he looks at her. A black folder is clutched tightly to his chest, two Aurors flanking him. "Hey."

"Hey, Hermione. How are you?" He's breathless and afraid, and she doesn't know why.

She looks at his immaculate robes, the comb lines in his hair, and the white knuckles against the darkness of the folder. "I'm well. How are you?"

She clears her throat when the question comes out like an accusation, glancing up at the stiff faces of the Aurors. It had been a long time since she had seen Colin, but that's the way it went. There are people she sees almost constantly, and there are others she wouldn't see in a year. At the start of the war, no one really knew anyone's abilities, and the teams were picked at random from the list of available people. When mission leaders grew to know the fighters inside those names, they picked the people they liked, that fought well, and fit the mission. Hermione finds herself paired with a lot of the same people, and when she isn't, it was because they are busy on other missions.

She hadn't worked with Colin more than a dozen times before he disappeared into obscurity. Now, staring at his professional appearance and his escorts, she thinks there might be more to it than the choices of mission leaders.

"I've been fine. Started a project, taking photographs of the war. No action shots...I was in safe houses, and with the healing team for most of them. I want to put on a gallery, but I need approval."

"Oh." It makes sense - Colin always loved his face behind a camera. The presence of the Aurors means he has to be escorted, which can only mean that he's no longer a Phoenix. She doesn't know how she feels about this.

"I… When I was fighting… There are these moments that no one thinks about. They're not as important as the battle. But there are these moments in the safe houses, when people sit around and remember. Or when they forget, and they laugh. I have this…"

She steps back as he fumbles with his folders, two of them dropping to the floor when he tries to open one. He mutters something to himself, shoving the folder out at her. She takes it slowly, glancing at the Aurors, then lowers her eyes to the pages of photographs.

There's faces of preparation, and anger, or fear - it's the time before a mission, she thinks, and feels the deadly quiet in her head that always accompanies it. There's another, an injured line of bodies, and a Healer running panicked, shirt wet with one, five, a dozen different blood types. Two members of the Order, wounded, dragging one another across a field.

"This, uh…this one shot, of a bread basket passing hand to hand of strangers. There's one piece left for the last two, and the guy splits it and gives the other half to the stranger next to him, without a thought."

Mad-Eye with his head down, and someone else's Phoenix band waving in the wind through his fingers.

Colin shifts, taps the edge of the folder in her grasp, and then his hand hovers there. "And that's a moment. You know, people…people should remember them."

Hermione blinks at him, rapidly, surprised at the gloss over her eyes. She doesn't like that he left the Order, but she doesn't hold it against him. He's still there in his own way, in the only way he can handle being there. And people should remember, and know, and see. *This is who we were*. And the ones that weren't there should know it too. They should know that it had always been far more than colors blasting across the sky. Some part of them should latch on, should somehow *get* it when they looked at the picture of Moody. Should think, *oh. Oh, this is what they gave.*

"Thirty seconds," the Auror to her left tells her instead of Colin, sliding his watch back into his pocket.

She never noticed it until Lavender pointed it out the last time they had seen one another. *If I'm standing there with an Auror and a Phoenix, even if one of them is talking to both of us, they only look at the other person. Like whoever doesn't fight in the war isn't worthy for eye contact or something. I wanted to hit him with my fake arm. And I mean, where it* counts*, Hermione*. She doesn't know why that is.

Respect, arrogance, or some subconscious showing of camaraderie. Maybe it stems from that deep part of herself that tries to force her to think of dark things when she closes her eyes. That tells her the only people who will ever understand are the one who fight with her. In a way, the knowledge of that draws her closer to a stranger than it does to Colin, a man she knows.

That is the breaking of the bread, the Healer as frantic as they would be if it were their own child. It's a common, unbreakable link between all those who had ever seen war. They know the haunted look sweeping your face as clearly as they know their own. And when you know, without a doubt, that the person in front of you knows the deepest, darkest, ugliest things about you because they recognize it in themselves - they don't really feel like strangers anymore. No one's that much of a stranger when you run the risk of dying beside them every day.

"Can I see them some time?" she asks, as Colin pulls the folder from her fingers.

His nervous, panicked face breaks into a smile. "Yeah, definitely. I would like to share them with everyone."

Hermione nods, stepping further to the side. "Good luck."

"Thanks... And hey, Hermione? Take care of yourself."

"Yes. You too."

Day: 1540; Hour: 13

"Aren't you hot with that sweater on?" It is an insanely hot day for the end of August.

He ignores her, because the answer is obvious, even if she didn't get it. Headquarters allows them Cooling Charms, which meant all the rooms were comfortable. They weren't *cold*, though, and looking at him in a sweater is making her hot. She thinks maybe it's a cold inside himself that he can't shake. There's darkness smudged under his eyes, and she doesn't know if he's been sleeping at all. Their conversations have been forced, or he just stays quiet until she fades into it.

"You know what?"

He stops chewing his bagel for a second, his eyes lifting from the book and sweeping across the room. As if looking for someone or something to interrupt whatever she is about to say. He sighs, resuming his chewing and returns his eyes to

his book.

"I know a lot of things, Granger. I'm fairly sure whatever is about to come out of your mouth isn't going to be worth remembering."

She narrows her eyes at him, swallowing her own bite. "Maybe it will blow your mind."

He raises an eyebrow, glancing at her, and looks at her like he'd sooner worship house-elves than believe that. "The explosion of worthless knowledge you're about to bestow?"

"Well, now that you're so ungrateful, you'll never get to know."

"I'm mourning the loss of my life revelations." He likes to fold the halves of his bagel into its own half, which she finds odd. She wonders if it's to limit the horrifying possibility of getting cream cheese on his face.

The only sound in the room is of pages turning, Hermione finding her bagel inadequate now that she is reading about some glorious feast. She wants chicken, steak, and fish. She wants potatoes, and watermelon, and shrimp. She wrinkles her nose when she things logically about combining the last three.

She glances at Draco, clearing her throat, and might imagine the smile that blinks on his face. "Have you ever seen what mayonnaise - like a little left over on a plate - looks like after sitting there for hours?"

He turns his head toward her, eyebrows up, and takes another bite from his bagel. He chews slowly, and the left corner of his mouth turns up just a fraction. He looks beyond smug. He looks like every thing he believes just came into truth in front of him.

She glares at him and he swings his eyes back to his book, the smirk growing, not bothering to answer her.

Day: 1541; Hour: 8

"Didn't you get some salve for that?"

Draco shifts in his seat at the edge of the bed, pulling up the zip of his pants, and glances back at her over his bruised shoulder. "There's nothing in stock that can be used if you're not dying, or coming close to it."

She stretches out across his bed, yawning with the pleasant pull on her muscles. She had thought he left yesterday, until she woke up in the middle of the night to his back on the other side of the bed. She had contemplated moving over toward him, but was back asleep before she could move a finger.

"How did you get that anyway?" she asks, and he stiffens.

She doesn't think he'll tell her, and she's right, judging by the way he ignores her beyond the glare he throws over his shoulder. A warning, she thinks, and she frowns, pushing her foot against the top of his bum. He reaches behind him, grabbing her foot, and then releases it quickly on her gasp. He turns to look at her, but she's too concentrated on the hand hovering over her foot.

"What ha--" She cuts off with realization at the dark bruise circling his entire wrist.

"What?" He pulls the blankets up to expose her feet, and she pulls them back. She hates when people look at her feet. Not that there's anything wrong with hers, but feet are ugly in general.

"Your *wrists*," she whispers, eying the same bruise around his other wrist. She has a line of a bruise on the underside of both her wrists, and then some red that wraps around them. Draco's bruises are all the way around, dark and thick.

He pauses, looking down at them for four seconds before grinning wickedly at her. "I told you that you were lucky I couldn't break them. You have no idea how badly I wanted to get to you. They were also the only things I had to release some tension on...and there was a lot of tension, wasn't there?"

She flushes for two different reasons, but his fingers don't make it past her ankles once he glances at the clock. He gives a pull to her big toe as he pulls away, standing up from the bed and grabbing his shirt.

"I thought the window was closed last night."

"It was." She gives him a confused look.

"Then I wonder how that animal died on top of your head, Granger. It looks worse than it usually does...and--"

"I had to brush it last night," she bites out, glaring at him. Couldn't he find something else to insult her about?

His eyebrows come up, his amusement clear on his face before he pulls his shirt down over it. He's laughing when his head pops back out, and it continues as he leaves the room. She doesn't get it. Prat.

Day: 1541; Hour: 18

Wind kicks up dirt, and it hits the side of the ruined building like rain. Pebbles rolls across the large dirt circle, the cracked stone floor, and one hits her trainer as she scans the room. It might have been a ballroom or a dining hall once. The entire East wall is blown out, the West rising and falling in a jagged semblance of construction. Still, behind her, a pair of wings and a single leg is mounted in the corner, where she guesses a cherub once decorated. She imagines that the room had been opulent once, a declaration of wealth and class, fine-tuned to the beautiful things in the world.

Now the entire house laid in ruins. Remnants were scattered: the glint of a bracelet, the charred velvet and lace drapery, a doll with a burned face and one dull blue eye that makes her wonder why there is *always* a creepy doll, half a witches hat, a pair of leather boots, the intricate carvings in what might have been the leg of furniture or moldings. She doesn't know what happened here, though she can't say she doesn't want to.

It is an almost perfect circle of dirt, and in that circle are the ruins of a home, statues, a hole where a pond might have been, a fountain, a chair standing ominously in the middle of the path from the bent over gates. It is a barren landscape of deserted half-structures, a graveyard of humanity. People once swept across this ballroom, dreamt in these bedrooms, loved in the courtyard. People lived and died, and all that is left are these structures, this edifice of their lives.

In a thousand years, would this be all that was left for them too? Someone would come upon Hogwarts in the middle of a fallen civilization, and wonder at the lives that might have lived within those strong, magical walls. They probably wouldn't even know that magic existed. Would they even find anything they couldn't give a plausible answer to? Maybe *why* the sticks of wood were polished, or the staircases dropped off into space, or why there was protective gear with the brooms in the shed. They would tear the portraits apart looking for technology, and maybe men would die in an effort to keep the Mirror of Erised.

Would all they see is macabre symbols of lives, loves, and wars long gone? Maybe they would know nothing of how it mattered - how they had lived and breathed it, died *for* it. Would the world only know that they had been there, once, and nothing else? Some strange society of delusional people who thought themselves magical,

and only whispers in hidden corners would speak the possibility of truth.

Or even in just a hundred years or so, when there would be no one left who even fought in the war. Maybe it would all fade and disappear under comfort, routine, the 'normal' way of life that *this* war had given them. The war would be something obscure, some marked words of history, or buried in the wonders of oblivion. It would rage only in the memory wells and Pensieves of those who had been there.

It isn't just about the war, though. It's about the people. It's about Neville, Seamus, Fred, Justin, Mandy, the Pat-- It's about all of them. Because tombstones are never enough, and when there is no one in the world left to remember the people that they were, they are just grey markers in the distance of other lives. It is an almost impossible feeling, the one that takes over her then. The desperate, undeniable urge to leave a mark on the world. She does not want them to be forgotten. *She* does not want to be forgotten. Not in a thousand years, not in twenty. The cruelty of--

She twirls, her trainers squeaking and the pebbles popping. Ron lifts his hands up at the end of her wand, and for a second, fear steals his features. There is still apprehension when she drops her aim, so she shoves him in the shoulder. He pushes her back hard enough for her to lose balance, and it's amusement on his face now when she looks up from her spot on the floor.

"Thanks, Ronald," she snaps, pushing herself up.

"Where are we supposed to find this Pensieve anyway?"

"The--" She stops, cocking her head at him, and fumbles in her pocket. "Headquarters. Now."

She's in front of the gates before Ron even gets his hand in his pocket, and she holds the coin up to the row of Aurors. "Hermione Granger, Order of the Phoenix."

They inspect her coin for two seconds, already knowing her face, and turn simultaneously to dismantle the wards at the strange noise of approval from the woman in front of her. Hermione can hear the *pop*s behind her, but is too busy rushing forward to look.

"Ronald Weasley, Order..." And the rest is lost as she runs farther away, up the incline to the manor.

She waves the coin at the two guards on the porch, who throw the door open

before she's even up the steps. McG-- Minerva is running down the staircase when she skids into the foyer. She can hear pounding steps from the ceiling above her and the porch behind her. Her adrenaline, and an overall lack of sports when she was a child, make her almost miss catching the black box tossed her way.

Being called for backup is never a good sign. What makes it worse is that they always went in blind. No maps, no plans, no idea. The Portkey usually leads to the mission teams meet-up point, and if no one on the team is there, it becomes a matter of locating the flying spells or sparks in the air. Being called for backup means they enter a very bad, dangerous situation. It always scares her more than assigned missions do.

Another box sails over her shoulder as she rips hers open, grabbing the earring hard enough for the hook to pierce her palm. She closes her eyes as the world blurs, her body following the pull at her bellybutton, and breathes through the spin. She opens her eyes at a blast of cold air, stumbling over a rock as her feet touch the ground.

She blinks rapidly to adjust to the lighting, four times, and then there is a hissing sound and something slamming into her chest. Her wand comes up, but her hand is stopped by a body, a wrinkle of fabric, as the other flails for balance. Her eyes dart up, finding blond before grasping the lines of Draco's face. She is positive she is about to fall, her hand smacking into his shoulder and clutching down, before her back hits a wall, oxygen rushing out in a choking gasp. She thinks her chest might be broken, indented under his hand print, like he could draw his fingers in and grasp her heart.

Her groan of pain matches his own, and she belatedly realizes that she just iron-gripped his bruised shoulder. She releases it, wheezing in a breath, and his hand relaxes marginally. Which is good, because she's pretty sure if he pushed any harder, he would have squished her heart up into her throat, or just broke through to the wall behind her. His face is stretched into anger and confusion, and he might be just a little panicked with the way his eyes are flitting about her face.

To her right, near her feet, she can hear the sound of Ron grunting. Over Draco's shoulder, Harry is grabbing the arm of someone and practically flinging them into the shadows, only to do it again to the next person who appears. Everyone looks startled, and she has no idea what is going on.

"What the fuck are you *doing*?" Draco seethes, and when he breathes in, it sounds exactly like the blade of a knife, scraping metal.

"What do you *think*? You activated the coin." She grabs his wrist, wrenching his hand away to place her own on her chest, rubbing the soreness.

"We didn't activate anything," is growled to her left.

The look on Draco's face is entirely suspicious, and his eyes dart to his right and his left, scanning. Ron pulls himself from the ground, sputtering, and his shoulder brushes hers as he falls back onto the wall. Behind Draco is a manor, four windows lit on the second floor. There isn't more than a couple meters between the wall they are standing against and the front door. It seems they have just interrupted the team right before they initiated their plan of entry. They had almost blown the mission - they very well might have.

"Someone must have activated them on accident."

"They can't be activated on accident," Hermione whispers harshly to the stranger's voice.

"None of us activated them. It had to happen in the past ten minutes, right? I didn't see anyone doing it." Another voice from the shadows.

"There was probably just an error with the coins. The magic on them is old--"

"What the hell does that matter?"

"--just malfunctioned."

"Shut up," a new voice hisses, and Hermione can hear the edge of panic to it.

For a single second, no one breathes. In the distance, from the house, is the soft sound of classical music. The music begins to swell, but then it is lost again, under breath and shifting feet. "Did anyone tell anyone else about this mission?"

"I'm sure they'll come right out with it, Harry." She can practically feel Ron casting heavy, suspicious looks at everyone.

"Portkey out." Draco breaks his eerie silence, all tense, and she realizes that she's still grasping his shirt. She doesn't let go.

"What?" she murmurs back, and his eyes meet hers for a second before he speaks again, raising his voice a fraction to meet more than her ears.

"Portkey out. We've been compromised."

"I think that's a little drastic," the deep, rasping voice at her left ear says.

"We shouldn't let this pass up. Someone is obviously home, and they--" a female voice starts.

"Potter," is all Draco replies with, because Harry must be the leader.

Anything that Harry might have said is gone under a heavier silence. It is that hectic second of emotion between the action and the reaction, but that stillness is all it takes to lose. Hermione can see the bright yellow streams over Draco's shoulder, that second of a pause all around, before she grabs Draco and pulls him sideways. He doesn't move more than two inches, his eyes on hers with surprise before rolling up into his head.

A squeak pushes up from her throat, there's a scream from her right, and then she is covered by a blanket of numbness. The darkness follows immediately, Draco's weight sagging down from her hands, and her collapsing after him by a second.

Forty-Two

Day: 1542; Hour: 16

It feels like a blink. Like she had just blinked her eyes right after Draco began to crumble down and the numbness took her, and then she just opened her eyes to a completely different scene. There are no memories, no long dark void, just a blink.

She cocks her head at the tight concern on Draco's face. Why is this strange again? Why is she here, *where* is here, and why is he looking at her like that? There is a deep pain in her body, and her heart is a jackhammer, and she doesn't know *why*.

"Hermione," Draco whispers harshly, gritting his teeth as he shakes her.

"Dray?" She shakes her head, clearing out the fuzz around her vision. "Co?"

Okay. Alright. The ruins, the coin, the manor, Draco, the team, compromised. The yellow streaks, numb, but there's a ceiling over his shoulder and not a forest with enemies and spells. Where-- "We have to go. Carrying you is one thing, but you have to stop screaming."

"What?" She shakes her head, pushing to sit up as her body shakes, and he stands, lifting her to her feet instead. Her body protests, pain flaring up, and a whimper strangles in her throat. She can't see properly out of her left eye. Her face feels like it's tight and filled with air.

Draco's bare chest is covered in blood. There's a gash still oozing blood a finger's length below his left collarbone, running from the middle of his chest to the crease of his armpit. There's another, a large Z, at the right side of his stomach, and his wrists are bleeding. His left eye is swollen shut under a bruise of purple that travels down his nose and around his other eye. There's a welt of a bruise on his jaw, and a split in his mouth. It's full blown panic on his face, and it only increases her own fear.

"Can you walk?" The question comes from the man over his shoulder, a face she recognizes as one that Harry had thrown into the shadows a couple...seconds ago?

"Of course."

Draco grabs her arm, spinning them out into a...hall? Torches line the wall, but only a few are lit, flickering against the thick shadows. As soon as her foot jolts down in a run, she has to bite back the vocal exclamation of her pain, her knees wobbling out. There's a tearing sensation across her left ribs, a blinding pain in her right, and burning, *burningburning* in her entire back.

Her body automatically pulls to a halt, as if knowing she can't go on before her mind does, and Draco is lifting her into his arms like he was expecting it the entire time. Like he was already bending to do it before she even stopped. She hisses as he jostles her, the arm under her knees fine, but the arm against her back intensifying the burn. She throws her arm around his neck, lifting herself against him, but his arm only follows. With a start she notices that she's wearing his shirt, and she can't tell which seeping maroon stain is hers or his.

"Draco," she tries to whisper, but it comes out like a grunted growl.

"Don't even breathe." His voice is so low that it takes her mind several seconds to make out what he says through the jumble of breathy noises that were supposed to be words.

She doesn't know what's going on. She doesn't know why she's in such pain, what happened to her or Draco. She doesn't know how much time has passed since the last thing she remembers, or what happened in that time. What she does know is that they are obviously trying to escape, they don't have their wands, and if they had Portkeys, they would already be gone. She knows that Draco's chest is trembling against her, that there are rigid lines of pain with the panic on his face, and the last thing he needs to be doing is carrying her.

She knows the rules. If she's too injured to make it out on her own, and her team members are too injured to help her, they are to leave her behind, secure backup, and inform them of her location. Draco is putting up an effort, but she's a liability, and she knows it.

"Put--"

"If you even say it, I'll shove my fingers into the whip marks in your back, Granger, I fucking swear."

Whip marks?

"You--"

"This is where I lost Potter and Amery." She looks up from the grimace she was shoving into Draco's neck, her mind halting in the search for a solid argument, meeting the eyes of the man behind them.

Lost? *Lost*? What the hell does he mean, *lost*? '*What?*' she mouths.

"They were grabbed," he whispers, bending his head to hers to do so, and almost trips on the stairs Draco starts up.

The pain becomes an angry beast, and she squeezes her eyes and bites her lips against the jumping motion and Draco's own pained groan from his throat. There is a yell of surprise, and then it is dark again.

Day: 1543; Hour: 2

There's a coldness against her side, and she blinks out into the darkness. She thinks she must be on a carousel, with the way she is tilting and spinning, before she focuses enough to find herself lying on the ground. There's a metallic bitterness to the air, and sulfur, and she's afraid of what that means. There isn't a sound around her beside the dripping of water next to her head. No breath, no movement, and she is alone.

She thinks she should get up, find a way out and find the others, but she's so tired, and with her awareness, the pain flares back again. She clenches her fingers, tries to find something to lift herself up from, but she can't feel them. She can hardly breathe, let alone move, and though there is something screaming inside of her, the darkness snuffs it out.

Day: 1543; Hour: 13

Groaning. Low, raspy, crack of a groan. She blinks until the world is in focus, staring down at orange light over stones, sparkling from the wetness. There's a soft laugh in front of her, but it's harsh at the same time...bitter and cruel. The orange light blinks out, and then it's back, and she can make out the trail of bloody saliva dripping from mouth.

There's footsteps, panting to her left, and she's slow to raise her head. A clinking and scraping of metal meets her movements, and she peers out into the faint light in the chamber. She's in chains, tight metal cutting into her wrists high above her head, her body hunched forward. She straightens, the toes of her boots coming down a little more onto the floor, and a sob of pain accompanies the burning and tearing sensation in her back. Fabric - Draco's shirt, she remembers - clings and

pulls at her skin, caught in dried blood, open wounds, and the yellow gook that eventually forms scabs.

The wall, and then the hall and staircase, and now the dungeon. Her mind is swimming in its struggle to piece everything together with all the missing spaces. It feels like a movie, the disc scratched, that just kept skipping scenes until nothing really makes much sense. Her arms are numb, her hands tingling, and she's so confused, it hurts her head. The pain in her body is dull compared to when she was last conscious, but the whole of her still aches.

There's a dark, hooded figure in the shadows, pressed against the farthest wall. A mask gleams back at her, just as brightly as the teeth in the grin below it. They had obviously failed in their escape. The whole mission was blown to hell. This is the third time, she thinks. The third time she has been captured. Apparently, it's the charm for *them* and not her. Apparently, Lady Luck had had enough. Her only hope is that the Order has realized they are taking too long, and they will send in more people.

Until then...*wing and a prayer*, her mum would say. But Hermione is pretty sure they don't have a wing - they might not even have a prayer.

"Two Mudbloods and a blood traitor." The Death Eater is smug from his shadows.

She looks to her right, some small surprise clicking through in the back of her head when she spots the woman chained next to her. She has no idea who she is, but her entire face is covered in a patchwork of bleeding slashes. The woman is crying, silently, her chin to her chest. Hermione rolls her head to the panting from her left, and hates that he is there at the same time that it calms her. The calm lasts only a moment, a second before natural reactions turns to realization, and then she is more afraid with his presence than if she were alone.

His head is sagging, sweat-dampened strands of blond obscuring his face from her. He's still bleeding, but by the prevalent darker shade of dried blood, she is guessing his wounds just reopened. His breathing is ragged, cackling in his chest, and his body jerks spontaneously through the shaking. She knows the Curse by effect alone, and she wonders just how long Draco had been screaming before the punch to her mouth awoke her.

"Dra--" she tries, a crack of letters, and he shakes his head.

"Isn't two days of torture enough for you people?" the woman next to her sobs.

Hermione gives a jerk, wincing at the movements, as her head snaps back to the girl. Two days? *Two days?* Had this woman been a part of the team? Have*they* been here for two days? Where is the *Order*?

"Tsk. Not when we bought ourselves three, Mudblood. It's amazing how breakable some of you are. Just a half hour of pain, and he was going on, and on, and *on*. Didn't take much for him to operate that coin and let them know the mission was complete. Said they give three days for reports to be filed, and that's when they'll start getting suspicious if he doesn't turn up. So, we still have some time together, don't we?" The Death Eater was practically purring, gloved hands clenched in some sick form of excitement as he grinned at them.

Mission leaders carry two coins. One the same as they all carry, alerting them for backup. The other is one only connected to mission leaders, Lupin and McGonagall, and the Ministry heads. It informs them when a mission is complete, and after that, the leader has three days to get to Headquarters or the Ministry and file the mission reports. They have never had a problem come out of that method, but the Death Eaters have never captured an entire team, or were brazen enough to keep them where they caught them.

God, they have epically failed this mission, and they might all die because of it. She is struggling to think how she could have been here for two days, when all she remembers is a span of about ten minutes in total. They must have done something to her mind. Or perhaps she had been sleeping. Or they erased part of her memories, though she can't know why. She's confused, and there's a part of her mind that keeps trying to convince her that this isn't real. This can't be it. And she knows that she thinks that every time it comes close to being it, but *please, God*, this can't be it.

She doesn't know how they found out about the coins. She doesn't know how the coin activated and told them to come here for backup. It's like Draco said - they had been compromised. There's a traitor among them, but one thing she knows for sure, is that it isn't Harry. And Harry, the mission leader, had definitely not given up information - at least, not correct information - no matter what he endured in a half hour.

"You're lying." It was spit from her mouth before she could even think to censor it, her anger blowing the weariness and fear from her bones like an explosion of dynamite.

Draco hisses beside her, and then she is blown against the wall, the toe of her boots scraping and her head cracking. Pain rips in a wave from her shoulders and

down, and she screams shortly past the gasp of air rushing out from the impact. An unseen force tightens its grip around her throat, the woman's crying stops, and she can hear the heavy clanking of Draco's chains. It's joined by her own as she struggles to reach for her throat, the metal rubbing her skin raw around her wrists. The blood begins pounding through her head and under the skin of her face, but she can't breathe at all.

She kicks her feet back, gripping the chains in her palms and yanking up, lifting her legs. The bottom of her boots meet the wall behind her, and she tries to scramble up using the faint purchase she finds there and what's left in the strength of her arms. The black webbing around her sight begins creeping in, like a spider spinning across her vision. Her feet slip on the wetness of the wall, and she tries again, thrusting up, like air could be had if she just got a little higher.

She can hear screamed words, Draco and then a girl, but it's distant and secondary to her situation. Laughter echoes out, but then it morphs, forming a voice that's booming in its anger. The force gets even tighter against her, violently clamping down on the passageway for continued life. She is not afraid. Instead, there is a reckless anger, a shaking of rage. She is too *tired* of being afraid. And if it's here, right now, that this war takes her, this *coward* who can only beat her defenseless, she will not be afraid. She will not give him the satisfaction of her fear. She's too angry at him, at her life, at herself, to give into the painful squeezing of panic in her chest.

She blinks hard, trying to focus, trying to will her body to squeeze the oxygen from her blood. The ache in her lungs turns to pain, a savage scream from her instincts to *breathe* or die, and... And then it's gone.

She inhales sharply, coughing and choking, and her feet drop from the wall. Another inhale, another, another, the oxygen sweet and still too weak, still not enough. Again, again, again, until she is more dizzy from the surplus than the lack of it.

Hot tears of anger slip to her cheeks as she releases her grip from the chains, dropping down the inch with a horrible jerk that pumps a wave of fire along her bones. She meets the maniacal glinting eyes across the room, the sweeping grin, the smug stance.

"Liar, liar, liar, liar," she rages.

She is cut off by Draco, in a voice so heavy with anger that she doesn't recognize it. "*Granger*!"

"*Oh*, it's going to be so much *fun* to break you," the masked man seethes, halting in the three steps he took forward.

"You'll have to kill me first," Hermione says, spitting the blood from her mouth, and feeling the wetness slide down her chin.

"Me? I believe I'm bestowing that particular honor upon someone else." He turns toward his left with a great billow of robes, and Hermione chokes at the figure emerging from the shadows, coldness dropping to her stomach.

But they are not Harry's eyes that look at her, or his hands that clench the roll of a whip, or his feet that take him in front of her. It is not Harry at all. The sheen over his eyes, the blank expression, his presence like this in front of her, tell her all she needs to know.

"Shit," Draco breathes, but she can't seem to drag her eyes away to look at him.

No, no, no.

The anger is caught between receding for preparation of what is to come, or growing into a bigger beast at what they have forced. She wants to cry and strangle someone at the same time. She wants to hug Harry, because she knows if they make it out of this, or if he does, he won't forgive himself. And she wants to scream at him, too, for not putting up enough of a fight to break through it. Surely, even under such a Curse, Harry couldn't kill her. Surely, this was one of the biggest injustices of them all, that they could do this to them, of all things.

Because in all the ways she imagined her death in the muted light of a room barred up from the sun, it was never this. There was quickness, there was torture, there was rape and her guts hanging from gaping wounds. But this had been too beyond the knowledge of her cruelty for her to grasp the idea of it in all her preparations for her own end.

She'd rather them cut her piece by piece. She could die knowing it as the face of her friend but the mind of an enemy, but she could not die knowing what he'd live with.

"No," she found herself whispering, shaking her head at the crooked glasses, the wild hair. Not this. Not. Like. This. Of all *possible* ways, not this. "Harry--"

And with a resounding *crack*, the whip lashes out from his hands. It is a millisecond of shock before her body recognizes the pain searing across her

stomach, and she screams. Head back, fingers grasping, body seizing, screams. She can hear the high *whoosh* as all that dizzy oxygen runs out.

"Legs up! Legs *fucking up*!" Draco yells, and they buckle and seize before she can pull her knees up, wrapping her fingers around the chains to keep her whole weight off her wrists.

She screams again, feeling the leather rip into her flesh, right below her knees. She can feel wetness sliding down her stomach, pooling against the waist of her jeans, and now down her legs. She keeps her head back, not wanting to look, until Draco screams at her to keep her head down and she pins her chin to her chest. She is on fire.

"We're not going for the throat yet, blood traitor." There's a laugh from the shadows, and Hermione really wishes she hadn't started to cry.

Another crack against her legs, and the scream still forces its way out from her clenched teeth. Her shoulders heave in a sob directly after, and she can't *believe* this. It's *Harry*. And she knows that he's not in control, but it still hurts in a way it's not allowed to. Hurts in the way *they* wanted it to, because it's still his body, and she knows he's somewhere inside of it. Because he is the only one with a chance to stop it, and she doesn't know if he's strong enough, and what that will cost the both of them.

Wasn't love supposed to be the greatest thing of all? Wasn't it supposed to be enough to save them?

It is revenge, to have Harry Potter kill his best friend. And, oh, God, she can't even think of what they're going to do to Ron, or what they have. Is that Harry's blood on his shirt, or is that Ron's?

She can't even think of it. She can't even *conceive*-- She throws her body to the side on instinct at the next crack, and it might have taken the entire skin of her upper arm back with it. The end flicks around to her back, reopening wounds and duller pains, and the chains jerk her forward again with a gurgled cry. Maybe true evil does exist. Maybe Voldemort hadn't ever loved anything but the pain of others, and maybe it's the same for the Death Eater at the end of the room. Maybe she had been wrong in even thinking they weren't pure. Their pure blood, their hatred, their evil. They were--

She turns again as the whip twists and arcs in the air like a giant snake, striking out at her. The leather slices into her ribs, on the side she strongly believes is

broken. "Harry!" she screams, spinning back around, and her eyes open on their own accord. She's sobbing, and gasping, and pleading. "Harry, please, please, no. I know you're in there, and if you can do... I *know* you can do this. Fight harder, Harry!"

The whip hesitates, and she stills her breath, her eyes digging into his and *pleading*. She stares so hard, like if she just concentrated a little more, she could see right through his eyeballs and into brain matter. Brain matter, or his chest cavity, or *wherever* it is that houses the spirit, the human soul, the Harry she knows. But it's not good enough, or her silence goes on too long, because his arm rears back, his wrist flicking as she spins herself again.

She screams herself hoarse as it tears into her back, and her legs drop, her fingers falling away from the chains. The metal cuffs nearly break her wrists under the pressure of her weight again, and she sags with what little slack she has. Draco is yelling at her, the woman is screaming at the Death Eater, but it's not where Hermione's mind is.

She raises her eyes, meeting Harry's, and blinking the tears away to see him clearly. "Hey? I love you. And if you can hear--"

"What's wrong, Potter? Not man enough to throw off a little curse? Your being held like a Hufflepuff first year under *that* bumbling fucking idiot?" Draco snaps, thrusting his chin toward the back room. "It can't be that strong. What are you thinking about in there? Prancing around in a field of fucking daisies while you torture your best friend? How did you even kill Volde--"

Draco is flung back, screaming with the yelled Cruciatus Curse across the room. His head is thrown back, mouth open in a terrible scream that resounds through her head. It makes her lose her breath, burning itself to her memory, like the image of his tendons and veins bulging as his body convulses. Another wave of tears covers her eyes at the agony mutating Draco's face, but she is also shaking at the pause of the whip and the tremble in Harry's jaw. It almost hurts to say it, just in case this is the last time. Just in case she'll never get the chance to tell him she didn't mean it, but she has to, just in case this is the *only* chance to make it past this at all.

"I'm surprised you didn't need me at the Graveyard, if this is how weak of a fighter you turned out to be, Harry Potter! What, did Voldemort just concede? Roll over and let you kill him? He must have, you coward! You *Slytherin!* Here you are, following the orders of a *Death Eater*! He'll have you kill me next! Is that what you want to be? A Death Eater slave? A--"

"Why don't you bend over, Potter? Let him--" She can't hear the rest of Draco's words, her body flung back at the force of the Curse, and then the pain. *Oh*, the pain. That blinding, all-encompassing pain.

No matter how often she thought of it - despite trying not to - she could never remember how horrible it is until it happens again. Until that raw, vicious fury of it consumed her. *That's it*, she would think, before the pain took complete control over all her senses, thoughts, and feeling. There are no words to describe it. It is beyond the very worst of what one could imagine - there is nothing else that could make her wish for death before it breaks.

It recedes slowly. Like a giant boulder thrown on top of you, replaced by a slightly lighter one crashing down, just a little lighter still, and on. On until her thoughts come back, and she can taste blood and smell it, and her body is throbbing and shaking with pain when she was sure it was broken beyond a chance to breathe again. She can hear the cracks of a whip, and has no idea why she can't seem to feel them on her skin.

She's going to go now. Her body will concede to war before her mind ever could, and she'll go on to the places they send soldiers after the darkness. But all she wants is to open her eyes to light. She wants to feel the sun on her face and her friends at her back, and she wants that light to crawl through her irises and explode into her chest. She wants so badly to survive.

There is a murmuring to her side, until a word breaks through and forces her to open her eyes. "Potter!"

The cracking stops, and she lifts the mountain weight of her head, waiting for her vision to clear. It isn't much use, her body wracked with a heave and forcing her head back down. She gags, and heaves, and chokes, until the acidic taste of her stomach bile is wretched up. It splatters between the toes of her boots, and she stares in a dazed wonder at the bit hanging from her lip before she finally spits it off. She spits again, trying to clear out her mouth.

"Grab her first." Draco's voice is lower now, but she can hear the panic, and it reminds her of why she has to be strong still.

She looks up, and her eyes settle on Harry. She blinks slowly at him, taking him in from boots to hair. The whip is at his feet, and he's *covered* in slashes of blood. It almost looks like he's been whipped himself, but he moves toward her too fluidly, and...

"I'm F.M," he gasps out when she flinches away from his hand, and two identical tears track down his red-covered cheeks.

"Hurry up! Before someone comes!" the woman hisses next to her.

"It's alright, Herm--" Harry starts, and his voice is too choked, his skin too pale, and he's shaking too.

"I know," she whispers, her voice so hoarse that she isn't sure he hears her. "I know."

She feels like crying now. Sobbing, actually. Really, really, crying. Like those breakdowns she sometimes has, where she rocks, and sobs so hard her throat is raw. Where she's alone, and loud, and *gives in*. Just for a little while. Just enough to be able to *move* later, when all the weight of her grief isn't *suffocating* her so much.

God. She will never erase the image from her head, and she feels so *guilty* about it. She feels so terrible, because it's not his fault, and because this will haunt him far more than her. He was the one to do it, to see every moment, to not be able to stop himself beforehand. But she will never blame him, or hold it against him, and if he ever spoke about it, she will pretend that this doesn't matter. It doesn't. She can't let it.

Harry's eyes are wide, sparkling green under the heavy tears coating his eyeballs. They shimmer at her, and she doesn't know what she can possibly say, and her vocal chords feel like they are sagging down into her chest. She pushes forward on her toes, just enough to brush her lips against the rough hair on his chin, and his arm is around her before she can swing back.

"I'm sorry," he grinds out over her cry with his arm pressured onto her torn back, pointing hi-- a *wand* at the chains.

A wand. Her eyes flick over his shoulder, to the fallen body near the far wall, and there is red *everywhere*. Pools on the floor, slashed up on the wall in wide arcs. Had that been why Draco screamed his name? Had it been to stop him from his vengeance, from the loss of his control? The Death Eater is either knocked unconscious or dead, but by the blood…all that *blood*.

"It's not your fault. I don't know if I would have been able to stop." It's all she can get out before her voice collapses under a cough, ragged and wet. Her hands fall from the cuffs, and she yells out again at the pain that shoots through them.

"Got you, got you," Harry repeats in her ear, swaying her like a father against his chest for a moment. She closes her eyes, hurting *everywhere*, as she swims in and out of a fog of blackness.

She must have given into the pull of unconsciousness for a moment, because she had not heard the sounds that must have accompanied Harry freeing Draco and the woman. For a moment there had been no pain, and it had been blissful. There is too much to do to give in, though, and as she contemplates the attempt at walking, she feels Harry's arms slip away. Her eyes snap open, her vision swimming, but a new set of arms wrap around her, and she doesn't have to see to know.

His hand pushes her hair away from her face, and one grey eye stares intensely back at her. He's still tremulous from the Curse, and he swallows hard enough for her to hear it. He leans back, sending a purposeful look over her head, and the muscle in his jaw twitches.

She's in too much pain. The pain, the fact that she must not have eaten in the past two days, and the sheer volume of blood she has lost is enough. She is useless, and she knows it. She can be of no help to them, and she has never felt *more* useless in all her life. She is just beginning to contemplate what she can possibly do to get them out of there when she is off the ground, the pain increases, and the darkness wins.

Day: 1544; Hour: 20

Minerva, to the right at the edge of her bed, in shadows. Her face is pulled tight, sour and grief-heavy, and Hermione thinks they must be safe before she is asleep again.

Day: 1555; Hour: 6

Ron, a piece of chocolate sticking out of his bruised mouth, jumps when she opens her eyes and sighs when she closes them again.

Day: 1555; Hour: 19

Draco, his thighs pressed against the edge of her bed, his arms crossed and his mouth scowling.

Day: 1556; Hour: 8

She thinks it's Draco at first, but it feels all wrong, and she opens her eyes to

black hair and clenched eyes. Harry's forehead is pressed against hers, his arm wrapped around her, and his cheeks look wet. Her body feels heavy, her mind cloudy, but she is awake, and alive, and alive, and alive.

He's in the middle of speaking, "--seeing you like that. If I could change it, I would, but I was so tired, and in pain, and the magic was so strong." His voice is a rise and fall of emotions, thick and low.

"It wasn't you." He jumps at her rusty voice, and he doesn't open his eyes like she thought he would. His arm squeezes her tighter, and his fingers curl into the shirt she's wearing.

His face is bruised, and the arm resting above their heads is completely wrapped in bandages. He raises his hand to his face, wiping at it, and his hand is nearly black. From the wrist to the tips of his fingers is a huge bruise, puffy and grotesque.

"I--"

"It wasn't you."

"But I--"

"It wasn't you."

"It's like he was back in my head again. Like all the evil was inside of me, and like I couldn't fight it this time. I *became* it. No matter--"

"You'll never become it, Ha-"

"What I *did* to you! I just keep seeing--"

"It wasn't you."

"Stop!" he yells suddenly, eyes flying open, bright, haunted green. "Stop saying that, Hermione! I--"

"No. Not until you get it, Harry. It wasn't you at all. It was just your body, but it wasn't you."

"I should have tried har--"

"I know you well enough, Harry Potter. I know you tried as hard as you could, and

you ended up break--"

"It was too--"

"I love you. I don't blame you, because it wasn't your fault. It wasn't you who did it, it was *him*. The Imp--"

"I was there, inside--"

"It doesn't matter!" she snaps, coughs hard enough for her torso to jolt back and forth with it. He flings his hand back to his face, rubbing like he might be crying, but he isn't. "Harry, if you had a single bit of control, there might be a bit of myself that blamed you. But what happened…we both know that is not something you would *ever* do. That Death Eater did that to me. I don't care if it was by way of your body - it wasn't you. If you weren't so strong, and if you didn't try so hard to break through it, we would all be dead right now. So if you feel guilt, or anything stupid like that, you just need to think about this logically and stop being…Ron thick."

Harry pauses, taking three even breaths before meeting her eyes. "Ron thick?"

She clears her throat twice, trying to get rid of the scratch. "I just woke up, you have to give me a couple minutes."

He lets out a long huff of air and covers his eyes again. "I can't stop seeing it."

Neither can I. "It's the same as if you were chained to the wall right with us and had to watch i--"

"It's *not*. You *know* it's not."

Hermione wraps him into a hug, and pushes her forehead against his again. She wants to ask him a lot of questions, but it's not the time. She doesn't really know how to be there for him properly right now. She keeps seeing it too. She can't stop herself. It had felt like a nightmare in front of her, and she wants to vomit every time she thinks of it. But it hadn't been Harry. It hadn't been her Harry at all.

She knew his guilt would come, but she hopes that it passes quickly. Maybe if she ignores it, and goes on pretending like it never happened. Then maybe she would forget to see it too. They can be strong together. They have always been strong when together.

Day: 1556; Hour: 12

Hermione has been in the infirmary at Headquarters for three days. Harry had left her a few hours ago, less shaken and pale, and it's progress. There hadn't been anything left to say to one another about it, and for an hour they had just sat there in silence, and waited for the moment they would start feeling better about it. He dropped her wand on the side table when he left, without an explanation, and she clung to it so hard her fingers began to burn.

Her body feels normal. A little sluggish, but well rested and healed. Bruises spot her skin, but she barely pays them any attention. So many situations she had come out of during the war thinking her body would never be the same again. There are scars, but if it had been the Muggle world, she would have been dead by now. Many times over. Despite that she's spent over half her life in the Wizarding world now, every time she awakes after something like this feeling normal, she can't help but look with awe at the Healer who took care of her.

"Where are my boots?" She looks up from the empty sides of the bed, to the Healer marking off something on a roll of parchment.

"Ah..." The man puts a finger to his temple, as if to conjure the memory, and Hermione tries to take calming breaths. "Malfoy. I told him to leave your belongings, but he...very adamantly insisted upon returning them to your trunk. He took your clothes as well."

Adamantly insisted. Yes, that's Draco. She can only hope he is still here somewhere. She hadn't felt right asking Harry just what had happened, and she remembers Draco the most from the gaping memories. There are a lot of empty spaces she needs to be filled in on or she's going to go crazy.

"Oh. Um... Can you, er..." The Healer gives her a quizzical look, and she gathers her resolve. "There are some scars I--"

"Of course," he interrupts, walking briskly toward the cabinets along the wall. "I'll need you to put on a gown and then lie back on the bed."

"Oh. Right. I..." She flushes, feeling awkward, because it doesn't make much sense. "I only want certain ones taken care of."

He hands her the gown and gives her a nod, too professional to make her feel weird. He closes the sheet around the bed with a flick of his wand, and she changes quickly, cataloging the angry, welted scars from the whip.

Forty-Three

Day: 1556; Hour: 13

She feels odd walking out of the infirmary barefoot and wandering through familiar and confusing halls until she finds Draco's room. It's a little troubling, walking out of your hospital room, through a house, and to your bedroom. Well, his bedroom.

She contemplates the door in front of her for several minutes before deciding to knock. It's a door down the hall that opens first, and she glances over her shoulder to see Draco exiting the bathroom. Her stomach flips in that stupid way it's prone to do when she sees him, and her breath catches. It feels so good to see him there, standing and looking at her, alive. So beautifully alive. When she stops to contemplate life, she sometimes realizes that every breath and movement is an incredible, thrumming moment of existence.

They just stare at each other for a long moment before he sweeps his hand toward the door.

"Is it locked?"

"I don't know."

He gives her a strange look, and she rolls her eyes back to the door, the handle opening easily under her hand. He slides past her as soon as she takes a second step into the room, heading for the two chairs facing the fireplace as the door clicks shut behind her. The curving wooden frame and soft leather interior of the chairs give a regal air, but they are about as comfortable as a cheap beach chair to her. Draco, of course, looks like a king holding court as soon as he sits down. There's a snifter and a yellow notebook - which isn't his, or he didn't pick out - laying on the glass table between the chairs. The glass catches the dance of the low flames from the fireplace, and it almost looks like the table is on fire.

She fumbles with her hands before walking to the other chair, trying to get comfortable against the curved, rigid back. Draco is scowling at her, which isn't the reunion she had been wanting when the last time she really saw him, they were both chained up in a dungeon.

"You're not going to break down, are you?"

"No," she says slowly, drawing the letters out and betraying her apprehension.

It had been a bad situation, but she could hardly grasp it in her head enough to break down about it. They are all alive. There had been a lot of pain, but she doesn't even know where the majority of it came from. Her captivity had been terrifying, but it is not the worst she has faced. The two things that would haunt her had been within the same moment. Draco, screaming in agony, and Harry, in front of her. She had just spent hours talking through the latter, and then watching the Healer remove the evidence from her life. The former is what she is currently trying to get out of her head.

"I don't need, want, or expect an apology..." He leaves the rest of his sentence floating the moment her eyebrows draw down, and his own mirror it to share her confusion.

"Apology?" She tries to make him continue, running through a jumble of memories in search for something she might have done.

She wants to reach up to ease the lines from his forehead, but she holds back as he turns suspicious. His eyes are intense on hers, and his left cheek puffs out a fraction as he pokes his tongue against the tissue. She can see the moment he makes a decision, but he still looks bothered when he looks away from her.

"Tell me what you remember."

She looks back to the fire, a headache creeping between her temples. "I remember the spell, trying to move you. You got hit, and then I must have. Then I woke up to you shaking me, we were inside... I was in pain, and you said that thing about my back. Everything went black when we started going up the stairs. I was in the dungeon then, alone, on the ground. I passed back out. Then I woke up chained, when the Death Eater hit me in the mouth. That whole thing with Harry... I passed out when you lifted me. Woke up in a hospital bed."

Draco's silence is thick. She shifts under the scrutiny she feels his eyes leveling her with, before meeting it head on. His jaw is twitching, and she watches the bump of his tongue sweep across his cheek. He blinks his gaze to her knee, and when he lifts it back to her, his face conveys only boredom.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes." He looks more surprised at the quickness of her response than she feels.

He blinks at her and then flicks his wand, the room lighting up around them. He reaches his other hand out to her, an expectant look on his face. "Come here."

She grabs his hand and stands, giving him a curious look before he tugs her toward him. His wrists are just as bruised and tender looking as her own. She doesn't know if she'll ever be strapping Draco to a bedpost again. Not after she's seen him hanging in chains, his body writhing and arching in pain. She shudders at the memory of the raw scream that broke from his throat, tendons and veins popping up against hot red skin. He pulls her into his lap, and if she clutches his hand and arm too tightly, he doesn't say.

"Do you know Legilimency?" he asks, with all the air of someone who knows she was going to jerk back from him before she does.

"You do?" She's in danger of toppling off his knees now, reaching out to grab the arms of the chair. His face is blank, save the cruel twist of his lips.

"Is it that surprising?"

"Have you..." She trails off at the angry flash in his eyes.

"I hardly think I would bother asking your permission this time if I have."

Oh, God. *Oh, God*. He wants to go into her mind right now? She knows he must have wanted to search through her memories of the mission, but she also knows that the mind is full of layers that he would have to sift through. Layers, mind, her thoughts, memories, and *feelings*. He can find out every bit of detail in how she thinks about him, feels about him. Suddenly, all those things she lies to herself about, ignores, and tries to shove away, come rushing back as hard knowledge.

Do you trust me?

No, he didn't plan on digging through everything in her mind, and he wouldn't try to plant any ideas there. If he wanted to, he would have done it without asking for her to agree. He would have never told her about this skill in the first place. He obviously respects the boundary of her skull, as much as he appreciates that she never tried to hammer the lock off his trunk. A couple years ago she would have accused him of doing it, reported his ability to Moody, and never looked him in the eye again. Now, well...she just *knows* he hasn't abused it with her.

But, no doubt, he will find things anyway in his journey to her memories of that night. It isn't the things she can actively remember that he wants either - it's the

stuff she can't. He probably wants to try and dig for them; to see if there are any pieces of them in her head that are too buried for her to conjure at the moment.

She has already told him, in a way, that she feels something for him. *I'm not a war whore*, she had said, and he must have known what that meant. But there is a difference between saying something almost insignificant, and him *feeling* her *feelings*, which are not very *insignificant* at all. They are sort of huge, sometimes. Sort of huge, and overpowering, and terrifying.

Do you trust me?

She can back out of this like a scared little girl, running behind weak excuses, and make him think she didn't trust him at all. Or she can put her brave face on, prove she trusts him, and hope to God *he* isn't the one running after. He probably will be. He could have taken her war whore comment to just mean that she didn't want to be treated like one, since she *only* slept with *him*, or something...something. This, ha! This...

"Never mind, Granger," he says, and he's all ice. "You're going to have to go to the Ministry so a--"

"No, just do it." What?

"You're obviously uncom--"

"Draco, just do it." *What*? She hasn't thought it through yet! Why is half her mind ignoring the very realistic threat in front of her? Why can't she *shut up*?

It's like one side of her brain has had enough. The hiding, the uncertainty, the unknown, the questioning, the fear of their fragility. A part of her just wants him to know. A part of her, that brave part, wants him to know everything so she can finally know too. Eventually, it will happen. He will find out, and he might leave because of it, or he might stay for it. It is inevitable; but she thinks he is far more likely to leave than stay, and she doesn't know if she can handle that right now. If she is strong enough to throw herself out there and lose...this.

She thinks it's time to be an adult. To handle this in a logical manner - but nothing about them is really logical, and it never has been. This might be a very great mistake. It wouldn't be her first.

She raises her eyes to his and he stares back at her. Through the deep swell of panic she wonders if he's doing it right now, but then he casts the spell, and she

realizes he had been giving her time to back out again. His fingers just brush her cheek before he pulls away with a groan. Her heart flips.

"Your head is about to explode from panic, Granger."

"Yeah, well, I've never had anyone in my head before and it's a little scary, no matter who it is!" *Pumppumppumppu-pump*, is the song of her frantic heart, and just as she's about to make her escape, his hands close over her cheeks.

Her eyes automatically dart to his, and the intense concentration makes her freeze. So, he's back in there then. She can't even feel anything, or...see, or know where he's looking. Her breath catches, her escape ruined, and she's wide open for him. Anything he could possibly want to know about her, right there for the taking, and she would never know.

He's going to run. He's going to push her off his lap, maybe give her a sad shake of his head, and quickly cut off any interaction between them that didn't deal with Order business. She can just see... His hands slide across her face, his fingers weaving into her hair, and his hot breath puffs against her mouth. He can probably...hear, know, what she is thinking right *now*. He probably heard that. That. That. Her breath releases in a whine when his lips twitch.

"Relax," he mutters.

Easy for him. She has never been so exposed in all her life, and he wants her to *relax*? How is that even possible? Why did she agree to this? It would have been much easier for him to think she didn't trust him than have to deal with this. Not trusting him she could make up for. This? There's no turning back. This... Jesus, *this* he can hear, and she needs to stop *thinking*. She sings a lullaby in her head, and his thumbs reach out to stroke along her cheekbones. He must know what that does to her now too, because his lips twitch again and he repeats the motion.

She reaches up to trace her fingers around his bruises, to lightly brush over the swelling. "I'm fine. You're distracting me."

"Sorry," she mutters, blushing, and frantically tries to stop feeling the worry, or anything else looking and touching him inspired within her. She pushes the silky locks of his hair from his eyes before dropping her hands against his chest, thinking of colors.

"You can blink."

She does, rapidly, feeling stupid for holding them open the whole time. She feels stupid for this whole stupid idea, actually, and she can only hope that... She narrows her watery yet dry feeling eyes at him, using Elvis, Heaven, and jungle room to complete that line of thought.

"Stop moving your eyes."

She gives a little jump, forgetting herself. The smallest twitch in his facial expression and she automatically sought it out. It's not like she has an entire mind to go through. She has to settle for his eyes, and while they are very nice eyes, and ones she is known to stare into quite often, there is only so much staring she can do. It is a little awkward to be sitting there, staring into each other's eyes in silence. His gaze is intense, but slightly unfocused with the way he's looking *into* her and not *at* her. It's unsettling -- not to mention that she is far too nervous to be staying in one spot like this.

His eyebrows draw together, and the second after she again denies the urge to ease the wrinkles, he speaks. "You can touch me all you want in a second."

She blushes, quieting the part of her that bursts up with hope that this means he hasn't stumbled on anything too...emotional. She can't contain the overwhelming desire to touch him, though, and his comment didn't exactly inspire images of her hands on his forehead. She watches his eyes narrow, and he's smirking at the very naughty things flashing through her mind that she can't censor.

She groans in embarrassment, but then gasps as an image fills her mind of...herself. Her, naked, back arched and mouth open as she cried out. Draco's arm was wrapped around her waist, the other fondling her breast as they moved together. Locks of blond obscured the top of the vision, but she knows it from the hotel all those months ago, in the bath. It's Draco's memory of it, the sound of his panting much closer than her own, and her face getting closer as he pulls her toward him.

She looks completely undone in his memory, just as she remembers being, and it's so *weird* to see this. To see it exactly from his point of view, the image in his head. It's his memory, in her mind, and it feels so personal and...intimate. Like she can touch a part of him she never knew she could, and it isn't anything emotional or profound, but it still amazes her. She waits for her memory-self to open her eyes, but the image goes dark.

Draco, very real Draco, moans in front of her and wraps an arm around her, dragging her up his lap and across his growing erection. She wiggles down against

him before she can think not to, and he bucks against her in response, moaning again. It occurs to her that he must be feeling some semblance of her own feelings on top of his own. She could hardly control her own, let alone if she were overtaken by both of theirs.

Another image snaps into her mind, her body bent over one of the chairs they are sitting on, and him slamming into her from behind. The image is so vivid she almost convinces herself that she somehow forgot them doing it, but she knows it's a plan and not a memory. She hadn't been aware she was grinding herself against him until he grabs her hips and stills her.

"Give me a second," he practically chokes out, and she tries to calm herself.

She gets to forty-three when he kisses her, and she returns his fervor, throwing her arms around his neck. She gets lost in his mouth for several seconds before her mind returns to her.

"What did--"

"I knew what you were currently thinking and feeling, and I saw your memories from that night. That's it."

He must have really been careful not to observe anything that he didn't need, then. Amazing, luck-is-back-on-her-side, careful. Thank God he hadn't found too much, and thank *him* for respecting her privacy. This would have been an entirely different situation if he had stumbled upon anything, and relief floods her. She kisses him, relieved, appreciative, and aroused, before pulling away again.

He growls his frustration, but her curiosity is too ingrained. "Did you find anything useful?"

"No." He takes the opportunity to pull her shirt off. "I can't think right now. Later."

He grabs her face, pulling her toward him and effectively shutting her up. She thinks she'll stop thinking for a little bit, and just celebrate their escape. She doesn't think she has much of a choice anyway, with the way Draco is so intent on making the image he showed her a real memory. She'll get answers later, and for those she won't, she'll ponder over the questions until she figures them out herself.

Day: 1557; Hour: 7

"As soon as I pointed the wand at him, he Apparated out. I found our Portkeys, coins, and wands in one of the drawers, but it had some sort of spell on it… When I unlocked it, it felt like my arm was going to burn off me. I threw a Portkey to Malfoy, who had Hermione, then to Alicia, and Novak, who was holding Spruce. Spruce was already dead. The Portkeys took everyone here, except Alicia, who ended up at a safe house. Novak was the least injured of those returning, and I ordered him to let you know the situation, as well as the names of the team members we were forced to leave behind."

Lupin nods, the quill pausing over the parchment. *Harry Potter, M.L., OotP, M: 2, Scridge Manor*, is all Hermione can read before the paper is shoved into a folder. Hermione and Harry were the only two - at least present - that hadn't given mission reports. After Hermione gave the very basics of very little information, Harry had filled in some blank spaces for her. Namely, how they got out of there in the first place.

Lupin scratches at the back of his neck, meeting the five pairs of eyes around the table. "I know Malfoy already tried, but you're going to have to go to the Ministry, Hermione. Like Malfoy said, it's likely that someone manipulated your memories. Given the extent of your injuries when Malfoy found you… We know Death Eaters. Torturing people while they are spelled into unconsciousness isn't likely."

"Yeah, where's the fun in that." She's pretty sure it's Novak who spoke, but she only recognizes his face from when they tried to escape the first time.

Maybe it was the first time. It might have been the twentieth time, for all she knows. She hates that they had messed with her mind. It's the thing she holds close to her through the war. They have changed her life, bruised and scarred her body, stolen her friends, but they never touched her mind. Even under the fear, panic, and grief, her mind has always been hers. Now they have taken things from there too. All these things that were hers.

"We can only assume that you found out important information. Though it is likely they planned on killing all of you, they erased your memories in precaution. There's no other reason why they would have bothered, unless you knew something they couldn't afford us knowing."

"I knew they were planning something," Harry mutters angrily, his mouth set in a deep frown.

"Do you think there's a traitor?" Ron crosses his arms, and even his freckles look pale.

Lupin licks his lips, his jaw tightening. "It's probable. The coin was activated, which could have been a sign of guilty conscious, an effort to see if it would work or *how* it would work, or an attempt to get more of our side there. Or certain people."

"So you think the traitor was one of the ones who came?" Novak looks defensive, like they are all blaming him.

"Or they knew that Hermione and Ron would come, and they wanted to use them in revenge toward Harry." Harry looks uncomfortable, and she looks away before his guilty look could move from Ron to her. "I don't know. It's not possible to know right now. We don't even know if there really is a spy. The coins were activated, and no one is taking responsibility. The Death Eaters seemed to know of the mission, because they were waiting for you, and managed to catch an entire team *with* backup off-guard. They must have got the information about the second coin out of someone, but none of you reported them questioning you about anything."

"Which says something in itself," Draco drawls, sprawled out in his chair and looking bored, save the sharpness of his gaze. "No one, Dark, Light, or any other color, is going to capture a dozen enemies and not get information out of them. If a Death Eater's mother's friend walks through the door of the Ministry, we're interrogating them - even if we already know everything they do. The fact that they didn't even question us proves that not only is there a spy, but they're still active, and likely to be near the top of the information flow."

"Or the bottom." Hermione jumps in, her brain whizzing. "Anyone who even has access to those folders, or can manage to *get* access. All the backup information is nearly impossible to get to at the Gringotts vaults. I know the room is heavily warded here, and I'm sure it's the same at the Ministry, but there are people in both places who *specialize* in breaking--"

"It could be one of the guards too. Or, even--" Harry starts.

"It's far more likely that the spy is well-connected. A lot of people could manage to break into the file rooms, and some of them would even get away with it. However, not questioning us implies that they have all the information they need or want. They're current, so the person would have had to break in repeatedly to *keep* them current. It's impossible for that not to be detected."

"I agree with Malfoy. The only people allowed in those rooms are Minerva, myself, and...what is it you lot call them? The Ministry Stiffs? Any repeated break-in would be realized."

"It's also a possibility that the Death Eaters have all the information they need for their plan from one recent break-in, and didn't need anything else from us but...revenge. I think we should start compiling a list of all guards, ward breakers--"

"Why do you keep trying to get the heat off the 'well-connected' people?" Novak interrupts her, narrowing his eyes.

Hermione rears her head back in surprise, anger prickling up inside of her until it blooms in a flush across the appalled expression on her face. "I *really* hope that was not an accusatio--"

"You're out of line."

"Nov--"

"And Malfoy, wasn't it you who was muttering about how you wanted her to wake up so she could take down the wards on that room?" Draco straightens up, his face twisting into a sneer. "So you're good at breaking wards *and* you're highly connected. You're best friends with Harry Potter, and from the rumors, you have a *close* relationship with--"

"You don't know anything about her," Harry snaps, jumping to his feet.

Novak lurches to his own, and Hermione stands as well. Lupin is hissing something about maturity, and when Novak's hand grabs at his waist, all their hands mimic flight to an empty holster.

"Yeah? Isn't it *convenient* that she's lost her memory? Maybe she--"

"Enough!" Lupin stands. "Every--"

"I've been a Phoenix for--"

"What does that matter?"

"And I'm a Muggle-born! You don't know me, *obviously*, so if *nothing* else, why would I *ever*

"You tell us!"

How *dare* he? Never, in her *life* had anyone accused her of being an actual traitor. It's so absolutely impossible, but there is a dark, scared part of her, that is wondering just *what* might have happened in those blanked out memories. But a traitor? A *traitor? A traitor? Traitor?*

"Sit down!" Lupin yells, and twice more before anyone follows the order.

Hermione can't stop the shaking of her shoulders, and has to steady herself so she doesn't give in to the desperate urge to *move*. She needs to walk, or run, or smack him, but she settles for deep breaths. Deep, deep, breaths.

"I know this is a sensitive issue. I was wrong in assuming we could all discuss it in a rational and orderly fashion. All of you have an appointment at the Ministry tomorrow. While we're not *accusing* any of you of being a spy, every living team member will have to answer some questions to rule them out. Seven, tomorrow morning, you'll Apparate from the foyer. Understood?"

"Yes."

Day: 1558; Hour: 6

"This is very interesting."

Hermione glares even harder at the burly Auror. He probably spent most his life in a gym, convincing himself that every extra weight he lifted made him that much better than the rest of the world. She hadn't expected the interrogation to be easy, especially since the Ministry had run out of Veritaserum. There was a lot of accusations, awkward questions, and too much digging around in her head. The Legilimens they had sent in had taken so long going through her mind, Hermione is pretty sure he looked into far more than he had the right to.

She had simmered in her anger as they questioned her - nothing was considered intrusive or off limits, and they had treated her as if they *knew* it was her. Maybe that was part of their tactic, but she had never been treated so horribly by her own side. The years she has given, and all the things she has sacrificed and had to face, just to be treated like a traitor. It isn't a slap in the face, it's a kick to her mouth. It's like looking at everything she's done, and spitting on the worth of it.

But she tries to remain rational. If they're doing this to her, then they might be doing it to the traitor, and maybe then they'll find them. She can deal with it for that.

"We're going to have to hold you until we talk to the boss."

"*What?*" She stares at them, and she can feel her eyes bulge with the pressure of her shock.

"It's nothing personal," the Legilimens tries.

"Nothing *personal*? You can't be serious! I--"

"Six Aurors are dead, another is at the permanent ward at Mungo's. Yes, we're *serious*! This whole coin business, the fact that the Death Eaters knew the team was going to be there! Something is going on, everyone's smelling a rat, and *you* happen to have the first day or so *erased* from your mem--" Burly Auror yells at her.

"I'm a Phoenix!" Hermione shouts, rushing to her feet, and she's dizzy. "I have--"

"We're not saying you're a traitor--"

"You're holding me as a *suspect*!" Her breath rushes in, in, out, in, out, and her lungs hurt. She thinks of Muggle television shows, with planted evidence and cops with too much power. She thinks of innocent people sentenced to death, and she thinks of shame under false accusation, and she thinks of wrecking the line of his nose to gain back her pride.

The missions, the battles, the injuries and hospital beds. Her friends, the death, the smell of sulfur, the life she said goodbye to. The green jets, the close calls, the pain, and Seamus spin-*spinning* her away. She feels gutted. Have they found something she doesn't remember buried somewhere in her mind? Had she told them something, did something? Maybe it was Imperius. Maybe...

Hermione's eyes drift to the table. *I don't need, want, or expect an apology*... How had she forgotten that? It was the thought she didn't trust him, him inside her mind, the distractions that followed, all the wondering that got her too caught up.

Thoughts fly through her mind, too quickly to focus on individually, and then Harry with the empty eyes and the blood soaking his shirt.

"--things we have to clear--"

"Okay." She looks up from the table, clears her throat, but it still feels closed up. "Okay."

Day: 1558; Hour: 14

It's very strange, the way Draco pauses in front of the cell and stares in at her. She straightens up from her shadowed spot at the back of the cell, and a sudden moment fills her mind. Except she's standing at the other side, dragging in a prisoner, and looking at his dirty face inside. And in her memory of years ago, she had been thinking of the speed of life, and Hogwarts faces, and how strange it all was. This was before the boulder, the fights, the missions, the times he saved her life and she saved his. This was before *he* happened to her.

There's surprise on his face now, and she swings her gaze to the Aurors. "Why is he here?"

Draco laughs then, and she looks back to him, her forehead wrinkling. It's not angry, or derisive, but actual amusement. She can't find a single funny thing in this entire situation, but Draco has somehow found the silver lining.

"What's so funny, Malfoy?" The other Auror is all gruff and ruffled feathers.

"That you managed to escape with your limbs attached after telling her you were actually going to put her in a cell on suspicion of treason. Also..." his grin lights his face, "does Potter know about this yet?"

"Keep walking, Malfoy."

Draco jerks his arm away before Burly Auror can grab it, and the look he levels on him is *all* Malfoy. "Potter will look like a gift from Merlin if you so much as *breathe* on me, Gossum."

His threat is weak the moment the cell door shuts in front of him, and he and Gossum glare at one another before the Aurors walk away. Hermione clasps her hands in her lap, looking at the line of his shoulders, and feels memory-panic build up along her own. The walls around them are dark concrete, and she sees him sagging limp from chains with blood smearing his skin. She breathes in slow, deep, and shakes her head. Shakes it again. Clamps her hands tighter until her nails bite into them.

Draco pushes his fingers through the back of his hair, then tugs on them once, some muttered growl in his throat. His footsteps are heavy, and he sits down near her on the bed in rigid motion, a rustle of clothes and a creak of springs.

"Why did they put you in here?"

"If they put you in here, I can hardly think my chances were bright."

She scrapes a nail over her knuckle, around a small cut that is deep red and curves. "I'm missing memories. Maybe they found something that I can't find myself. Maybe I did something." She glances over at him, a second long enough to know he's looking at the floor. "Or I told them things."

He's quiet for five beats of her heart, and she wonders if he thinks or knows that she did. If all of them are already assuming that she did, and then she wonders what kind of fighter that might make her now.

"It still doesn't make you a traitor."

The silence lasts long enough that the sound of metal hitting stone seems to explode, and she gives a jolt, reaching for a wand they took from her hours ago. The footsteps are quick and hard, and her breath hurries, gaze automatically sweeping the cell for weapons and escape routes.

Hermione can feel a shift of magic in the air as Harry appears at the end of her cell. Locks of his hair are sticking straight up, and his mouth has disappeared into a line on his face. Gossum and the other Auror are behind him, faces blank, and there's a scroll in Gossum's hand that he hits against his thigh in a loose rhythm.

Harry's eyes meet hers for a moment, bright and angry, and travel her person quickly. "Release them."

She's curious if Harry actually got permission to demand that, or if he just decided to. They have a habit of acting rash when confronting something they know is wrong, and Hermione knows that when Harry is feeling this angry, he tends to act first and think much later.

"We can't do that, Pot--"

"*Release* h--"

"Malfoy is an Occlumens. We wouldn't have known, but Walter made eye contact with him in the corridor and caught a flash of memory before Malfoy looked away. Walter couldn't find it again once Malfoy came into the interrogation room. There were also a lot of things that...Granger seemed to remember, and Malfoy seemed to have forgot." The unnamed Auror explains this without looking at her, and her blush is fierce and quick.

Did they just look over them, or did they watch? Is it why they took so long in her mind? No one is allowed to see those but Draco, and she feels as if she just found a hole in the wall with a crowd of people on the other side. Exposed and trespassed against.

Draco's jaw is working over his anger, the vein at his temple raising up, and she knows he's furious with himself for the slip. She appreciates that there are things he tried to keep them from seeing, but he should have known they would find them in her mind - even if they had no right to. It isn't enough to claim him the traitor, but it proves he's able to tuck things away, and that's enough doubt for anyone who doesn't know him.

"I want to talk to the Legilimens," Harry responds, and exchanges a look with Draco. "He'll be coming with me."

Hermione's eyes automatically narrow at the sight, but both men avoid looking at her. Her heart thumps heavily against her chest, and her fingers curl up, because there's a part of her that *knows*, that's too quick to not put the pieces together. Gossum unrolls the scroll he's holding, scanning it with a grim set to his mouth. He rolls it back up slowly, staring at his partner, and then nods his head toward the cell.

She hesitates to stand, and her bum is barely off the mattress before Draco grabs her arm, pulling her so quickly across the cell that she stumbles over her feet. She wonders if he thinks she blames herself, or feels she deserves to be there, because she doesn't know why else he would look so annoyed or pull her like she wouldn't go herself. They follow Harry down the hallway, the Aurors talking low behind them, and Draco's grip slips down her forearm. They emerge into a large room of bustling people who stare at them the moment they enter, and heat creeps back up cheeks. There had to be rumors about the traitor by now, and they were all probably coming to conclusions about why she just came from the holding cells. She is embarrassed, angry, and angrier still at the prickling of *shame* she feels hot in her stomach. Draco stares straight ahead, his expression unreadable. Her fingers are cold with her palms clammy, but he still doesn't let go of her hand.

Forty-Four

Day: 1558; Hour: 20

"About time they released you."

A huff of a laugh. "Too worried about me to sleep, Granger?"

"You wish. I was plotting my revenge."

"Mm," and he really does sound excited by this. "Care to share?"

"Is it sharing time, then?"

He knows her too well. He knows she's crossed the line of playfulness or coming up with hollow threats because he remains silent. His belt clinks off something and there's a rustle of fabric, though he hasn't lain down yet.

"Why did it take them five hours to release you?" And he probably knows that she really means '*what are you and Harry not telling me?*'

"It took them about twenty minutes."

"Oh."

"Potter and I went for a drink."

She blinks three times at the bedside table. "*Really*?"

He makes a noise of amusement, and the bed sinks down. "*Really*. On the other side of the house."

She glares at him. "You were here for the last five hours?" she asks, but then it sounds too needy, too demanding of his presence, and so: "That's..." *weird*, "good."

He huffs a laugh, and she wonders if he can read her mind now that he's been inside of it. Then she wonders what he and Harry happened to talk about when the only things they share in common are her and the war, and no one likes to talk about the war. Oh, God. She *really* hopes Harry didn't give him some big brother speech or something.

"I haven't decided if Potter is less annoying when he's drunk, or just easier to deal with when I am."

They were together for hours. Was it the first time they had done something like this? Or is it just because they had something to discuss, and then a mission to try and forget?

He doesn't seem distant with her, and she wonders if it's the alcohol, or if she's wrong, or if he doesn't feel the need to be. "Well, I'm sure since you're no longer caught up in trying to prove you're better than him, he's--"

"I've never tried to prove I was better than Potter. I already knew it. Anyone who didn't was an idiot, and therefore, not worth my attempt in the first place."

"Oh, is that what you tell yourself?"

She can feel his glower against the back of her head. "It's what I know. But no worries, Granger, I don't hold the past against you."

She fists the blanket, staring down at the white of her knuckles. "You're so gracious."

"I'm aware. Your mental handicap is no fault of your own, no matter how annoying it is, drunk or sober."

"You stink."

The bed bounces, and he snorts. "Worst comeback yet, Granger. I see you're slowly deteriorating with time. I can't say I'm surprised."

"I meant you literally *stink*, git. Like alcohol."

"Well, let's see, Granger... I've mentioned drink, drunk--"

"I see you're annoying both drunk *and* sober, then."

"Perhaps if you stop trying to prove yourself better than-- What was that?"

"I said I'm going to start storing these memories, so when you annoy me *to death*, they can put you in Azkaban for it."

"That's cute, Granger. However, I'm sure they will see it was in self-defense.

Temporary insanity due to overexposure of Hermione Granger. Show them a couple memories and watch how fast I get out."

She glares at the far wall, muttering names under her breath, and hitches the blankets higher. Maybe she'll just have to remind him of this later. When he's kissing her, or he looks at her like he wants to consume her, or he's throwing her onto some bed. *Oh, no, Malfoy,* she will say. *I don't want you to be overexposed.*

"Amber, by the way."

"What?" *Who* is *Amber*?

"The color of your eyes, when you're turned on. Amber." He mutters something then about paint labels, a safe house, and brown.

She flops over onto her back, and looks up at his own, listening to the sound of his laces untying. She has to think about it far longer than her brain should take, and then she remembers wondering about it when he showed her his memory the other night.

"What made you think of that?" Because she doesn't know what else to say, and thanking him just sounds odd.

"I was wondering what was going on in your head. And then I weighed my options for tonight," he grunts as he pulls a boot off, and it thuds against the floor, "by contemplating just how tired and drunk I am." Grunt, thud. "Then I remembered."

"Speaking of remembering, and minds, and such," she starts, and he sighs. "What was the memory you blocked?"

Because she's pretty sure she knows exactly what it is. For a few seconds when he had been gone, she thought of not asking, but it's impossible for her to not confirm it. And if he's trying to keep it from her, there's not going to be a time he's more likely to tell her than when he's drunk; she can only remember three times she's seen him drunk in four years, and she's not waiting until the next chance rolls around. No matter how risky it might be now.

He rests his elbows on his knees and scratches his head, picking the clock off the table to inspect the time. The fact that he couldn't make out the numbers without picking it up says a lot about how much alcohol he managed to consume tonight, she thinks. "I'll tell you tomorrow."

She really expected him to not tell her at all. She had been fully prepared on trying to dig it out of Harry. And she knows the only secret they'd try to keep from her has to be about her. If it's about some unrelated event that happened on the mission they were on, Draco has the same clearance to know as she does, and there's no reason to hide it.

"Promise?"

He leans back, shoving his pants down his legs and flings them across the room with a kick of his foot. He pushes his hair away from his eyes and crawls into bed, plopping face first into the pillow. She might have laughed at him had she not been wondering why he didn't take off his shirt. "Romus."

She opens her mouth to respond, but a short squeak comes out instead when his arm flashes out to grab her, dragging her against his side. He moves his face out of the pillows, and she can feel his chin at the top of her head as he wiggles deeper into the blankets. She's stiff against him.

"Do--"

"If you don't shut up and go to sleep, I'll suffocate you with this pillow," he mutters, and she's pretty sure he just growled at the yawn that took up the second half of his sentence.

"I just--" she starts to say, and then cries out at the sharp pain in her hip.

She elbows him when he gives that low, evil snicker she pretends to hate. She ruins the effect when she reaches up a tentative hand to run her fingers over his ribs, and he's asleep before seeking revenge.

Day: 1559; Hour: 6

She greets Draco's morning face with her eyes wide and her spine straight. He groans, rolls back over, and promptly falls asleep. His shoulders are bare, and she knows he must have yanked his shirt off some time in the night. He rarely sleeps with one on unless he's too exhausted to remove any clothing at all.

She barely resists the urge to pull the blanket back, and she might have had she not thought it would wake him up.

Day: 1559; Hour: 8

As soon as her wand alerts her to the fact that he's awake, she brings tea the exact way in which he likes it and two aspirins from her own stock. He glares at the quirk of her mouth from his ruffled hair, bloodshot eyes, sluggish movements, and the lines on his face from the wrinkles in the pillow. He pushes up and leans against the headboard, the sheet falling just below the elastic of his underwear, and she examines his skin in the harsh light of day.

His shoulder and upper arm are still covered in a dark, painful bruise, though the edges are browning. A knot of a bruise puffs out from the swollen right side of his jaw, and purple blooms along his nose, smudging near-black lines beneath his eyes. Purple circles his left eye, the skin puffy, and the lid half covering his grumpy look. Both of his sides are covered with bruises along his ribs, and she can count five new scars along his chest.

He gives her a look, and she notices the little worried noises coming from her. She thrusts the tea out as distraction and he accepts it. His first sip is tentative, but he gulps the second.

"Swot," he rasps out, like she hasn't seen him make his tea a thousand times.

He gives a distrustful look to the two pills in her palm, and she rolls her eyes at him. "For your headache. The only thing it might do besides that is make you a little more alert. Just swallow, don't chew."

"I've taken Muggle medicine before." He sniffs, plucking the pills from her hand.

"Yes, well, Seamus and Dean once convinced Ron you had to insert them in the rectum, so..."

His face scrunches up in distaste, and he closes his eyes when the sun decides to clear the clouds and burst bright light into the room. She had thought about drawing the curtains, but then decided it would make him sleep longer, and she's too anxious to wait.

"When have I ever given the impression that I was as gullible or challenged as Weasley?"

She purses her lips at him, but it's pretty impossible to gather up any anger when he looks so wounded from their imprisonment. "I've been hanging out with Ron all morning. I don't think he was very pleased you seemed to have a boys night without him."

"Potter invited him. He declined." He looks like he would care more about discussing scented candles than Ron.

"Oh." It doesn't surprise her in the least. "Well, you'll grow on him." Maybe. One day.

He snorts. "I'm not a fungus, Granger."

"Beg to differ." She gives him a half-smile, and he glares over the rim of his cup.

"There's no point in telling you this, but Novak found out, and if you run into him, I'd rather you know what he's accusing you of." Draco starts like he's repeating a boring fact sheet, and she takes a seat on the edge of the bed, more nervous now that he wouldn't meet her eyes. "You were under Imperius." *Yes*. "Potter, myself, and two Aurors were chained up. One of them was already dead. They gave you a knife--"

"Oh, my God," she whispers, screws her eyes shut tight.

"You broke through the Curse in about two minutes - it-- The Death Eater had been behind you to watch, and you actually…stabbed him in the side of the face. There was a struggle." He eyes the large, swollen bruise covering her cheek and jaw. "You kept yelling for Weasley. I'm assuming he was wherever you came from, so you might want to ask him what happened before that. Another Death Eater came in, saw the dead one on the ground, and that's when your ribs were broken. He dragged you out. After that…let's just say I never thought someone's freakishly long toes would make me a happy man."

"What did I do?" He stares at the wild look she's giving him in silence, and her eyes drop to his chest just as quickly as her heart to her stomach. "It was you, wasn't it?" Silence, his face perfectly blank, and she launches off the bed like her presence could burn him.

"Gra--"

"I *knew* it." Her voice is a whisper, but it comes out heavy, and she stares at the scars on his skin. "The apology thing, I knew it. I forgot that night, but I remembered at the Ministry, and I remembered Harry, and I knew there was no other reason you could say something about an apology if I--"

"Grang--"

"Was that me?" She points at his chest.

"No."

"You're lying!"

"Granger, the most annoying part of it was that you were going to pull this later, so do us both a favor and--"

"I stabbed you! I--"

"They were superficial, you were fighting it the entire time. You were Cursed, it happens. It happened to *you* with Potter. It's not a big deal, and that's why I didn't bother telling you. It doesn't matter."

It doesn't matter. She must have said that to Harry five dozen times the other day. No, it's not like she would have *ever* done that willingly, but she *had*. They had forced her to hurt him. Does he look at her and see it replaying in his mind, like her when she looks at Harry now? She doesn't think of it as Harry, she doesn't blame Harry, but she sees it. Even now, is he actively working to make it disappear from his head as completely as it has from hers? And why can't she remember? She must have...must have sliced at him, stabbed at him, and she can't *remember* something like *that*?

"Let me see."

"What?" He looks at her like she must be insane, and it only grows into deeper lines when she crawls up the length of his legs to hover over his lap.

She presses her fingers very carefully to his cheeks, their eye contact solid. "Let me see."

"No."

"Dra--"

"There's no reason for you--"

"If I did it, I want to see it!"

"You don't need to."

"I want to!"

"No, you don't! What is that memory going to do for you? I've been inside your head, Granger, you're like an emotional time bomb, and *I'm* not going to be the one to set you off and deal with--"

"Jus--"

"Let it go."

"I wa--"

"This is why we didn't tell you! It. Doesn't. Matter. You had as much power over your actions as Potter did with that whip. You go on and on about Potter taking on too much for other people, and all this *shit*, when you are the same. Way. You don't need to feel bad about it. You don't need to remember it. It's over. Let-- Why the *hell* are you crying?"

"I'm not crying!" she snaps, blinking furiously.

His head hits the headboard with a groan. She stares at the long scar below his collarbone, setting her jaw. "I have an appointment with a Healer tomorrow to remove them."

She reaches out, her thumb traveling the line, and her breath rattles a bit. She understands what Harry had felt now. That anger at her own self for not being strong enough to stop in time. Draco had probably said things to try and break her out of it, had made sounds of pain. She had eventually, but she should have right away. She should have the moment she was ordered to hurt him at all.

She expects more from herself. She has thought about it since she left the interrogation room, *knowing*, and hardly slept all night, playing it out in her mind. Had it been a wand? A whip? She hadn't thought of a knife, but she had imagined that scream he gave under the Cruciatus, and he had given it to her, down the length of her arm.

"I'm sorry." Her voice sounds a little clogged and wet, and he groans again.

"Most people can't break the Curse no matter what it forces them to do. It's the reason Death Eaters with dozens of kills get off when they claim they were under it. People have killed their mothers, their wives, their children. You look like an idiot, apologizing for a few cuts before managing to break out of it. Stop with the pity

party. It's highly annoying."

If he's being honest in saying the cuts weren't too deep, that she had been fighting it the whole time, the curse couldn't have been too strong on her. She should have broken it sooner. If it had been worse... If she hadn't broken it... God, if she hadn't.

"I'm so--"

"If you apologize again, I'm going to tell Potter you reacted as if you did some horribly unforgivable thing to me. I wonder what he'll think of it. Your view of how guilty a person is when they hurt someone under a curse that takes away control of their actions. I think he'll be fairly interested."

He's glaring at her harder than the anger she can conjure to return it properly. She knows it's an empty threat, that it's a point.

"Do you see it?" She lifts her chin. "When you look at me, do you--"

"No."

"You haven't remembered it when you looked at me, not once, since--"

"It's not the part I remember."

They stare at one another until she drops her eyes to his finger, rubbing back and forth along the curve of his mug. She doesn't ask him what part he does remember then, because out of the possibilities that she knows, there are none she wants to remember herself. And not once had he let on that it disturbs him, that he's thinking about it, or has treated her differently or acted oddly. She believes him, because she thinks he's the sort to be honest about it. Even if he's lying about it for whatever reason, she's been looking for the hint of it too closely to have not found it by now.

All of them have encountered a fellow Phoenix or Auror put under Imperius during a battle, casting the Killing Curse at their own side. No one ever blames them. It's just a tactic of war, and like all things in war, there are victims. But she had been clinging to the hope that it would never be her. Especially to someone like him, or her friends, or her old professors, and most of all to anyone it would be too late to save.

"My life sucks," she mutters. "I--"

He laughs at her. Actually *laughs* at her.

She stares at him, snapping her mouth shut, and shoves him in his good shoulder. She scowls, but the way his whole body is shaking and his eyes are squeezed shut forms a tugging sensation at the corner of her mouth that she fights. It's like he lights up the room, and her stomach does these weird things, and her breathing gets strange. He bends his head to cackle in the space between them, and she tugs on his hair, annoyed because she wants to cry, and the last thing she wants to do right now is feel the burden lessen.

"It's not *funny*," she says, and he laughs harder.

Day: 1559; Hour: 21

When he sleeps, she holds her hand over the silver glint of scars in the moonlight. She imagines a knife in her hand, and she moves quickly in slashes and stabs, but she still can't picture it. A part of her is glad she can't remember, though she knows this is a weak thought. Draco seems as unaffected by it as she had told Harry she was, but she feels that she should carry the memory as well, so he's not alone in it.

She rests her head against his chest, staring down at the rise and fall of his stomach, and moves an arm around his waist. *Ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump*, she mouths to the calm beat beneath her ear. He grunts in his sleep, his hand edging under her shirt and up her back. His fingers spread out between her shoulder blades, pressing her closer, and she finally closes her eyes.

Day: 1560; Hour: 11

"Maybe there isn't a spy." Ron rubs his thumb in a circle at the middle of his forehead, staring down at the remnants of his lunch.

"You can't really believe that, Ron." Harry's eyes glint, and for a second, she remembers sixth year and how he wouldn't shut up about Draco Malfoy. She huffs a breath at the thought.

"Activating the coin could have been a fluke. If someone put the wrong mission number, and--"

"I doubt it, and plus--"

"Maybe the Death Eaters caught on when everyone started to Portkey in. We made a lot of noise--"

"Fine, let's just say that's right," Harry snaps. "Why wouldn't they question us? They would have tortured information out of us. Locations, plans, strategies, *everything*. So why not?"

"Maybe..." Ron's eyes flicker to her, and she drops her own, wide and unblinking to the table. "No offense, Hermione, but they could have gotten everything out of you, and you just don't remember. They took your memory because they didn't want us to know what they know now."

"Personally, I don't want to think we've been fighting for years against people so *dense*. They should know that we would assume they know everything, no matter what. It seems a lot of trouble to erase Hermione's memories for something like that."

"I--" she tries, not really knowing what she's going to say anyway.

"That's true."

"They took out the whole first day, up until before they took us. They must have thought she had been catching on, or maybe she had multiple encounters with the traitor. That's the sort of information they erase memories because of." When Harry convinces himself of something, there is little they can do to convince him otherwise.

Ron nods, burying his head in his hands for a moment. "All the team members, and backup, came out innocent. I doubt the spy was one of the people who died. So that means it could be...*anyone* but us."

Hermione clears her throat, trying to shake the uncomfortable feeling that settles over her bones. She hates not remembering things. A day of memories, gone forever from her head. Not that she wanted to relive the experience of someone turning her back to ribbons or anything, but she would like to *know* if she told them anything. She doesn't think she would, but she can't even know for sure.

"I want to make a list of all the people who have come through Headquarters, or accessed the Minister's floor at the Ministry in the past week. They came up with the mission in the past week, so if the Death Eaters were warned about the mission beforehand...the person would have had to look at the documents in that frame of time."

"That's a lot of people, Hermione." Ron gives her an incredulous look, because he never did care for anything involving parchment, research, and work.

"We can narrow it down by likelihood. We'll start with the guards who are always in front of the doors to the file room here and at the Ministry. We'll make sure none of them left the door unguarded at any time, and that they don't have a skip in their memories. If nothing suspicious comes of that, we're definitely looking at one of the Stiffs."

"Lupin said the interrogation reports state that none of the team members told anyone outside of the team about the mission. The meeting room is always covered by Silencing charms, and Lupin and I were the only ones to handle the folder outside of that room." Harry pulls at his hair, shoving his glasses up his nose as if he were too impatient to even give that time.

"What about Lupin's office? Did he leave the folder there at any time?" Ron asks, his blue eyes swerving over her head at the creak behind her.

"This must be some form of the conversation you three would have before you were about to get into a spectacularly dangerous situation." McGonagall's smile is grim as she rounds the table, peering at them over her glasses. "All the guards are being questioned now. I assure you that this is not the first spy we have suffered, and nothing we can't handle. The three of you have enough going on, without taking this on as well."

"Yes, Professor," Harry mutters, too occupied with his thoughts to notice what he said, or the amused look thrown his way.

"If we can be of any help--" Hermione starts.

"We'll be sure to let you know." McGonagall pats her shoulder, sends a disapproving look toward Ron and Harry, and heads for the kitchen.

"So, er... What do you imagine the Death Eaters used to eat at this table?" Ron asks, aware that McGonagall can still hear their conversation.

"Whatever humans normally eat, Ronald."

Day: 1561; Hour: 14

Everyone's on alert. She doesn't hear of a single mission for days. Ron reminds them of what Draco said about well-connected people with a significant look toward McGonagall's office. Hermione doesn't talk to him for two days. Harry decides they'll try to break into the filing room to see if they can, and if anyone will notice, if nothing comes out of the guards. When Hermione points out the risks, Harry

informs her that he's doing it alone, like the traitor would have, but she still sets up a contact coin in case he needs her. Molly drags Ron to the Burrow, and Harry and Hermione exchange guilty looks after they adamantly decline.

Whispers breath down every corridor of the Ministry, Headquarters, and the safe houses. There aren't many names that aren't brought up harshly, from Harry Potter down to Harry 'Twatter'.

Day: 1561; Hour: 17

"Don't even think about it, Granger."

She glares, dropping her hand from its inch toward his biscuits. "I just wanted one."

"That's nice," Draco mutters, flipping another page of the ancient looking book in his lap.

"You should be used to this by now. You should just fork it over as--"

She narrows her eyes to slits when his mouth starts moving silently over the words he's reading. She raises her nose at him and marches off for the kitchen, taking her book with her.

Day: 1561; Hour: 18

She plops down on the couch next to him, balancing her plate on her knees. She flips open her book on the armrest, nonchalantly waving the scent of her fresh biscuits toward him with her other hand. She had to make two batches after the bottomless pits of Harry, Ron, and Lupin followed the smell. She barely escaped with the ones she has.

She moans softly as she bites into the soft, sweet warmth of the treat. She devours it like it's the best thing she's ever tasted, smacking her lips and humming happily. She's halfway through her second when he stands, leaving his book open and on the table. She looks at him for the first time, watching him swagger from the room.

He's back when she's about to finish her third, and she looks over at the gulping noise. He smacks his lips, the glass of milk clinking as he sets it on the table. She swallows, her throat and mouth dry, as she eyes his drink.

"Thankfully, I managed to get a glass of milk before McGonagall continued siphoning the last of it down her throat like it came from the fountain of youth."

"Here," Hermione growls, knocking the plate into his arm.

He looks over at it, his tongue poking into his cheek, like he has to *think* about it or something. "I don't know, Granger. You might be the spy, after all. Having my lover poison me is a hackn--"

"Malfoy, I will poke you in the *eye* if you do not hand me--"

"You'll poke me in the eye?"

"Yes. With this finger." She raises the index of her right hand, and curls it menacingly at him.

He raises an eyebrow at her, his right eye twitching twice with his incredulous look. "Do it."

"What?"

"Do it."

She opens her mouth to question his sanity, and growls at him instead. Sadly, shoving the biscuit in his mouth doesn't take the smug grin off his face for more than three seconds. She snatches the glass and glares at him.

Day: 1562; Hour: 1

She has a dream. There's someone on the ground, a face unknown but a body that is familiar, and a stranger tells her there was a battle, a fight, something terrible. And Hermione runs through the woods like they are about to burn all down and take her with them in a crackling storm of flames and ash, and the pounding of feet and breath behind her is Neville. *I can't lose someone else, I can't lose another one*, she yells, cries, and Neville flashes through the trees after her. There are bodies on the ground, piled in a pool, and she grabs them each in turn by soaked collars and cold arms, and none of them are who she's looking for.

She wakes to an empty room, a layer of sweat over her forehead, and silence beyond her gasps for breath. She throws the blanket off of her, turning on the lights quickly, and stares at the ceiling as her heartbeat rages.

Day: 1562; Hour: 16

He finds her by the lake, under a swirl of orange and red leaves. The jumper Molly made her years ago is hanging off her, dark red, and a large, golden 'H' across the front. His own is dark green, the Slytherin crest over the left breast, and she finds it a bit…ironic. This could almost be Hogwarts, if they had been different people then. Maybe if they had grown up after the war. Maybe it would make perfect sense.

He holds up the book she had left in the house, a feather sticking out between the pages she had last read. She looks at it for a moment, then tangles her fingers into the hem of her jumper.

"I'm not trying to forget things." She says it in a harsh way, because there had been a half hour used up of her life contemplating what it would be like if she did.

Just the worst ones. The ones she dreamt about before she woke up feeling like something inside of her was dying and yelling out for her to save it. That slow, sinking burn that she sometimes feels even when she's not actively remembering anything at all.

"The traitor," she says, and the wind bogs it down, blows it out. "They think I knew who it was."

He shoves his left hand in his pocket. His right stays out, the one he would reach for his wand for. She looks at it in the holster at his side, the ridges around the handle, and wonders if the gloss where his thumb pushes has worn out like it has on hers.

"They said it was one of the Aurors who died, but they don't have any proof. It was just process of elimination. But I don't know why they would try to hide my memories of that if they were just going to kill--"

"There are several reasons why they might have killed him after they hadn't planned on it. And they didn't hide your memories, Granger, they removed them." He looks up at the sky, at the grey or the leaves spinning above their heads, or the bird diving toward a tree. "There's no skip in your memories, it's seamless. They removed them completely." He moves his arm out a little, and the book slips to between his side and forearm. "There's nothing you can do to get them back."

She had been afraid of that. Any magic involving the mind is dangerous, and she has read of quite a few things she hadn't been willing to risk, but there are some she

wanted to try after researching more thoroughly. Hermione is the sort who hates when she needs to know something and can't find the right book right away. When she needs to know it and it's already *inside her mind?*

She had to try. She wonders how skilled Draco is to be sure there's nothing left behind. He had cast the spell, so he must either not be skilled enough to just look at her and enter her mind, or he had done it for her sake to know when he was.

He's staring at her when she looks up from the water, and the arch of his eyebrow tells her he knows what she's thinking without any spell at all. "Do you know what happens when magic doesn't find a target in your mind, or are--"

"Of course I know. It can cause brain damage, bleeding, affect or even eliminate any or all of your senses. It can make you forget memories, or force you to remember random ones continuously, or--"

"And that sounds like a good plan to you?" He tilts his head. "There's a reason--"

"It's obviously not the desired outcome, but if there's a trace--"

"There's not."

"If it's a weaker potion or spell, it's most likely to cause the mildest side-effects--"

"You're willing to take that risk?"

She breathes in as deeply as she can, then releases it in a punch of air. She knows she can't take the risk now. He might be wrong, but if he's right... And it's not like she can check herself, or have someone else do it. As far as she's concerned, she'll never let another person in her head.

"No. Even if it's the lesser side-effects, I don't want to forget anything else. If it's a spell or potion to remember lost memories, and there are none that it can find to be buried, it'll cause me to remember...remember the ones *I* bury." Constantly.

It's bad enough when they break out of the wreckage she puts them under, by themselves or from the simplest things. A bark of sound, a candle flame, a shadow, a laugh that sounds just like..., an expression that would be said by..., a thing that would be loved if... If. And. But.

Sometimes she's afraid to stop and think. She's afraid to look beyond the immediate of whatever is happening, because she'll catch a glimpse of blue and see

Neville's eyes squinted, and a busted grin that couldn't notice the wound enough to stop from smiling. And then she'll feel like her heart dug itself out of her chest.

"And I bury a lot, I suppose," she mutters, leaving a track in the dirt with the toe of her shoe. "I keep ignoring things. Pushing them back and pushing them back, because I'm afraid I won't be able to even *function* if I don't. I think I should mourn for everyone more, because they deserved for me to, and because I might need to. Then I think about how it won't do me any good, and I should just keep pushing it away so I can finish the war."

He sniffs, maybe from the cold or maybe from the silence. "You think breaking down, becoming a patient at Mungo's for a couple months, is going to make you feel less guilty? It's not. Look at Weasley's brother - won't come out of his room, speak to anyone, broke his wand. What is that doing for anyone? This war broke everything. Letting it break you isn't going to fix shit."

She kicks a stone into the water, and watches it fade into the murkiness below. A red fish darts toward the disturbance, swimming circles. "Sometimes things need to be destroyed in order to save it."

Like the world. Like him.

"Granger, we're in the fucking fallout." His eyes scan across the lake, back and forth, like he can see it all in front and around them. "It doesn't get much more destroyed than this. Isn't that your bleeding heart cue to start saving?"

"It's just... Sometimes... Shouldn't it kill me?" She sighs, shoving her hair back from her face, angry that she can't find the right words to say.

"Like you'd let it." He's smirking at her, and her cheeks turn red. Not from arousal, or embarrassment, just warmth. The kind of warmth that starts from the inside and surprises you.

"It still feels surreal. After all this time, losing any of them...surreal. Like I still can't believe it. Sometimes it really hits me, and other times I just can't believe it's actually my life. They say that there's steps for grief, but I'm at step one, then the last step, then step three...in the span of ten minutes, I'm all over the board and back again. How's that for normal?" She pauses, watching the fish dart away. "I scare myself."

She would like to know if it's the same for him. If sometimes he sees Neville, or Pansy, or looks in the mirror and thinks of his father. If he dreams of the ones he

used to dream beside, and remembers how he watched them die. She thinks he must. But she also thinks he'll never say it, because he buries it down too.

"There's no *right* way to grieve, or handle war, or move on, or die. Some of us will turn into psychopaths, some of us will be George Weasley, and some of us won't have an idea about who we are. We've been fighting in a war for four years. There's no such thing as normal anymore."

Hermione nods, again feeling the connection that ties them all together. They are all destined for that road of unknowing after the war too. They are all going to either crumble to ash or build skyscrapers of themselves. They are all sort of screwed, and scared, and messed up.

"I should be happy." He turns his head toward her, and she glances at him before fixing her eyes on the lake. "When I went...Dean... When Seamus...when Seamus gave his life for me, Dean told me not to waste it. He meant for me to shut up, and the Death Eaters outside the door, but... But I think I'm supposed to be happy. I think I'm supposed to make it worth it. Seamus, and all the sacrifices, and my friends, and the war. I'm supposed to make it worth it."

There isn't a better way to honor their memory. She just has to *remember* to be happy. She has to keep reminding herself to work for that. To not waste the life she still has. She has to laugh even when it hurts, because she *promised* them. Because she can't let it kill her.

"Does that count toward *not* dying of hypothermia?"

She snorts, loudly, looking up at him. "What is with you and dying of hypothermia? You bring it up--"

"It's an embarrassing way to die. It's like, death by bees. Or death by slippers."

She huffs a laugh, and shakes her head at him as they exchange a look. "Hypothermia is a serious--"

"Hence my suggestion to go inside."

"Yo--"

"Implied suggestion."

The look she gives him might be mocking, and she flinches away when he shifts

toward her. His eyebrows dart up, and his hand is quick to follow, but she jumps back before he can reach her. They stare at one another for a split second before he moves again, and she breaks for the manor with a yelp, his feet pounding behind her the entire way.

Forty-Five

Day: 1563; Hour: 10

She lies with her hands up, fingers spread across the sky. Sometimes she feels like she can curl her fingers and dig chunks of blue into her grip. Then she opens her eyes really wide, like she's trying to shove the world into them, and feels herself disappear.

Day: 1563; Hour: 13

A hot mouth dragging down a long scar on her arm, then the rasp of a tongue over another on her hip. They are from the mission when Seamus and Justin died, and Ron was saved. They are her ugliest scars, and the ones he favors most.

Day: 1563; Hour: 17

She wonders about souls and rebirth. She wonders if she will look down at the eyes of Justin's child, and find him there, inside. If she were to get pregnant, perhaps it would be Neville's soul inside of the child, inside of her. People had been scared to have children when the war was like a hurricane through their cities and homes, destroying everything. When Harry killed Voldemort, when they claimed a temporary victory the world thought was final, it was like they celebrated by forming a new generation.

She wonders if they are all coming back. If she'll walk down the street in a couple years and see Fred's new self throwing Dungbombs into open doors of shops, some kid laughing like Seamus with his arms waving about like the joke was too much for him to handle. Two twins whispering and giggling, a child with a dazed wonder talking about things that don't exist, or maybe even Marcus Flint's twitching eye next to a Muggle-born mother.

Some people believe in reincarnation, and some people believe that babies remember their past lives. Their memories evaporate to fog by the time they're a year old, but it's then, in the beginning of their new humanity, that they remember all of who they really are. At this moment, is Lee Jordan clinging to his past as his new life threatens to destroy it? Is Terry Boot opening his eyes for the first time since he closed them on a battlefield, and peering into the face of his new mother? Are all of them lost and afraid? Are they not crying out at night for sustenance for their bodies, but for their souls? Is losing it just like dying all over again?

The mother in front of her shifts her child away with a strange look toward Hermione. The baby turns his head toward her and maintains their eye contact, his dark, brown eyes unwavering.

Day: 1563; Hour: 20

The night is always the worst. It's always the hardest part to get through. During the day she can actively force her brain to stop thinking about those screaming, shadowed places inside of her. She can find someone, or a book, or a television. She can shake her head, and concentrate harder, and slam it back again.

The night is the hardest. She tries to keep herself occupied until she is so tired her eyes burn, but it doesn't help. She can exhaust her body with missions, or with Draco, to the point where it rules her head and grants her sleep. But when she can't, her mind is far more powerful than any call to slumber. There's no denying the will of that darkness to be remembered.

Her dreams are the very worst. Nightmares forged with knowledge and memories. She dreams of battles, empty faces and broken bodies, of Harry behind the whip and Draco's tortured screams. Sometimes she dreams of her friends dying, or herself, or getting lost forever in a world of smoke. Sometimes she dreams of the ones who already are - she sees their death in front of her eyes, and no matter what she does, she can never save them. Sometimes she is cruel, and in her dreams they are there and laughing, telling her they are alive.

She doesn't think they will ever stop haunting her. And no matter how much it hurts, or how much she fears getting lost, she is more afraid that they will leave her be.

Day: 1565; Hour: 8

"He doesn't come out of the basement."

Hermione glances up from the floor to the young man in front of her, then watches the back of the Auror down the hall. The folder she had been sent to give him smacks off his thigh, and she gives it one more greedy look before the muffled, off-key song comes through the floorboards again.

"What do you mean?"

The redhead shrugs, sinking his hands into his pockets. "His mother died down there after coming out of a mission a couple months ago. He hasn't left."

"What does he do for food?"

He shrugs again, cracked nails and bleeding cuticles shoved into his mouth, and the saliva on his teeth gleams as he bites into his fingers. "I've been here for four months. I cook for him."

She thinks about George, about what Draco said. "Maybe you should bring him--"

"No magic here. The bloke is... There's no moving him."

"What happens when you have to leave?" She moves her shoulder back when he spits out a shred of nail or skin, though there's little chance it would hit her without wind or magic.

He spits again, again, and then laughs. "I don't know. That *song* has become my *life*."

She doesn't know what he means by that, because she doesn't speak French - but the way it's sung over broken things, she can understand. Everyone has their own war story.

Day: 1566; Hour: 1

He stumbles down the steps clad in only his boxers, rubbing his eyes and sleepy-footed. She thinks her body recognizes his presence before he registers fully in her eyesight. He stops for just a second when he sees her before continuing down the hall. She hasn't seen him in two days, and she hadn't even known he was here. She had thought she heard his voice yelling some unfamiliar name a couple hours ago, but she had been sure she was imagining it.

She shifts on the couch, sighing, bored and distracted with her thoughts, wishing there was a television to drown them out. She looks up at a clamor coming from the kitchen, followed by a muffled exclamation several seconds later, and shakes her head with a smile. A lot of people would probably tell her it was worrying how comforting his presence is to her, but she has accepted these things, because she doesn't have the energy to fight them too. She can regret it later.

She hasn't been able to sleep. Her mind is both her greatest strength and greatest weakness, depending on the situation. There are times when one must throw off their blankets in resignation and concede to the fact that there would be no sleep to be had that night. She gave up the fight at the pull of midnight, and hasn't looked back.

Draco walks back into the living room more coordinated than he had been before he left, and surprises her by sinking into the couch next to her rather than heading up the stairs. He takes a gulp of his water and reclines, throwing his legs up on the coffee table.

"Can't sleep."

"And here I thought it was because you *could* sleep that you decided to sit here in the dark at three in the morning."

She shrugs, her eyes following the crack that runs along the length of the far wall. Draco drops into silence, holding his cup of water to his chest, his fingers tapping on the cheap fabric of the couch.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I don't really know much about it." He shrugs. "I believe in the things that happen. Things that I can touch, see, feel. I believe in life, because that is tangible. It's where we are, and what we do, and it's everything."

"Well, that's where faith--"

"It's just a way to get answers, Granger. To explain the unexplainable. To feel better about the things that scare you, because God gives a reason to them happening."

"It's not just about answers. And how do you explain things anyway, then? Like how we got here, or the purpose of our lives, or where we go when we die."

"It doesn't matter how we got here, because we're here. And the purpose of our lives is the one we come up with when we're living it, and it doesn't matter where we go when we die, because we're dead."

"So you make up your own answers?"

"I don't *need* answers, Granger, that's the point. You die. You die, and you know exactly when, and why, and where, and *how* -- but that doesn't change a damn thing, does it? Because you're still going to die. In the end, it doesn't matter. Answers are useless."

"But they bring peace of mind."

"So does not thinking about the questions."

Hermione doesn't think she'll ever be the sort of person who doesn't think about the questions.

"Staring is rude."

"Sorry." She blushes, caught with her gaze on the odd looking gap between his big and middle toe.

"You do that a lot."

"Stare?"

"Blush. Around me."

She blushes deeper at this, which is horrible, since all her energy is concentrated on not blushing at all right now. She glares at his smirk in self-defense. "I do not."

"You do."

"It's an illness I have."

"Oh?" He looks entirely too amused.

"Yes. A, uh…blood pressure illness. It rises too high at times for no real reason, and changes my coloring." She knows this is perhaps the worst lie she has ever told, but she sticks with it anyway.

"I see."

"I was diagnosed at a young age. Very traumatic."

"I bet." She can hear the laughter under his voice, deep and restrained.

She gives him a *humph* before latching onto the first subject change she can find. "Can I touch it?"

"What?"

"Your…" She gestures to his foot.

"I…guess." He gives her a look to let her know just how strange he thinks she is for asking.

She ignores it, leaning forward to touch a gentle fingertip to the gap. He squirms as she feels along the small bump, the smoothness of his skin in contrast to the slight roughness of the thin red scar.

"I forgot you had a foot fetish." He arches his foot, his toes spreading out as she runs her finger in a circle.

"I don't have a foot fetish."

"You're the--" He cuts himself off, jerking his foot back, and she pauses, her finger hovering before she looks up at him with a grin. "Don't."

"The great Draco Malfoy has ittle ticklish feet, does he?"

"Yes, well… We all have to have an Achilles Heel, I suppose."

She snorts, leaning back into the couch again, and stores away the fact that he's ticklish there. Though she can't really use it against him. He had already discovered how incredibly ticklish she is on her neck, when he found just light breathing turns her into a squirming, giggling mess.

He stands suddenly, nodding his head to the hallway behind him. "Come make me tea."

"Make you tea?" She raises an eyebrow.

"You can put more water on for yourself if you want some."

She's indignant, but stands and heads toward the kitchen anyway. She puts the water on but makes him pour it, and they sit for hours in the kitchen, until it's lit with the day and they are tired of talking so much. About the weather, Neville's hopping nervous dance, and the strangeness of Lavender's lovers, though they both ignore his own inclusion - her with a glare, and him with a blank expression. They discuss people, and places, and ideas. They argue and debate potions, theories, and Muggle medicine. The conversation is fluid and easy, and she thanks whoever is listening that he woke up and decided to stay that way.

"Professor at Hogwarts or a researcher." He tastes the words on his tongue.

"Yes. I want to do some volunteer work, but... I want to find cures, like for the aftereffects of Cruciatus or a Werewolf bite. I think if I balanced it out enough, I could teach during the school year, research in my free time and during the summer holiday. Maybe."

He nods, his spoon tapping on the table to some old beat that is familiar but that she'll never place. "You're just going to take on everything at once then?"

"Should I not look to the future?"

"Look to the future all you want, but you're only going to crash if you try vaulting yourself there."

"But if you don't find something to work toward, what's the incentive to overcome your current obstacle when you see no reason to?"

"There's every reason to." He looks at her as if she should know this, and then he laughs, like he can't believe it. "Merlin...you're never going to stop trying to save the world, are you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Win the war, educate the generations, free the house-elves, mother the orphans, invent the cures for all that ails us. My little bleeding heart Gryffindor, with her hero complex. What is it? Do you think by saving the world, you can save yourself?"

She stares at him, her mouth opening and closing twice before she scowls. "Does the idea hit close to home, Draco?"

His head pulls back on his shoulders, like she just slapped the words into his forehead. She doesn't regret it, though, because it's true, and if he wants to try and shove truth at her, she'll push back. Draco never had to fight. Maybe he did because Pansy wanted to at first, and he didn't want to leave her alone. Maybe it was his revenge. Maybe he didn't know what else to do with himself. But, mostly, he fought for his redemption. He fought to bring himself out of that spinning void that stole him from the idyllic fantasies of his childhood. That ripped off their facade, and spit the crude underbelly into his face, and screamed *this is what you will become, this is who you are*. Draco fought to save himself, even if it killed him in the process.

"You got it, Draco. Despite everything it took, and how hard it was, you pushed your boulder off the mountain." It's not likely that he has a clue what she's talking about, but it doesn't matter. "You aren't your father's son. You've earned every *inch*

of your redemption. I'm…I'm really *proudofyouforthat*."

He's staring at her, but she doesn't know the look on his face. It scares her, and makes her want to cry, hug him, and take a cautious step away at the same time. She looks him in the eye long enough to let him know that she's serious, and swallows thickly. She means every word of it, and maybe she should have told him sooner. Maybe it matters to hear it from her, or maybe it doesn't mean a thing, but he should know. He's earned the right to hear it.

"But for me," she continues, her quiet tone still booming in the room, "it's not about that. Winning the war was about saving the world. Everything after this… If I can help people, it's what I want to do. I cannot stand people who have the resources, the abilities, to help people who can't help themselves, and they do *nothing*. Helping people makes me happy. And… Well, maybe I am saving myself in that case." She laughs, something surprised and bitter, and it's ugly. Personal revelations.

Silence. She stares at the table, tracing the grooves in the wood. There's a burn mark near the edge, and a memory hits her of Lavender resting her cigarette there, shuffling about the kitchen with kiss-stained lips and a grin. She had forgotten about that. Hannah had been singing a children's song, and Hermione had been trying to nonchalantly feel her lips to see if they were as swollen as Lav's.

Draco clears his throat, fifty-four ticks of the clock later. "There are worse things to do for happiness."

"Yes."

"But sometimes the things we want aren't the things we need."

"But sometimes you need to take a chance in life." And she has stopped thinking about her career ambitions, and has started thinking about him now.

"And you need to make sure the chance is worth taking." He picks up their empty mugs, moving to put them in the sink. "I think you need to go to bed, Granger. You're about three seconds away from drooling."

"I am not." But she *is* tired, and so she follows him out into the hall.

They stand unsure in front of her door before she reaches out to squeeze his fingers in thanks and moves into the bedroom. She hopes he will follow her, but he doesn't. She awakes curled around him in the afternoon, breathing deeply into her

hair.

Day: 1566; Hour: 11

Hermione walks into the Burrow to find Harry and Ron playing chess, and it's so close to normal, she feels like crying.

Day: 1566; Hour: 16

Hermione leans back with a sated smile, unbuttoning her jeans with a groan at her full stomach. It's the first good meal she can remember eating since...she can't even remember when. Probably before the Graveyard, here at this table. It had been different then. More people, laughter, and that urgent hope that the war couldn't change it. There are three empty spaces now, two with a plate set out in front of the seat. The third plate is upstairs - George had made it to the staircase before turning back for his bedroom.

Ginny's head is resting on Harry's shoulder, Molly and Arthur's hands clasped between a serving bowl of potatoes and a salt shaker. Molly is staring at her and Ron in that *way* that she does, and Charlie is complaining about too much food making him immobile. Bill is making fun of her for actually having to unbutton her pants, and Fleur awkwardly points out the appearance of Hermione's ribcage a year ago in an attempt to shut him up. Ginny glares at the older woman and looks to be attempting to strangle her drink.

She thinks they can work with this. Eventually the breaks of silence will fill, and the empty spaces won't feel like they take up most the table. If this is what they'll have left, they can still be okay. There is still enough to hold onto.

Day: 1567; Hour: 11

She finds him on the back porch, looking out into the woods, with his wand rolling between his fingers. She almost laughs, because life is funny like that. Because it has a way of spinning circles. A year ago, tomorrow, she found him on a different back porch, guilty over his failed mission. She had given him her virginity a few days later. It felt like years ago. Like centuries had passed just to find them here again. She wonders if he's thinking about it too. If he remembers that at all.

He had talked about plants, she can remember. Plants winding and winding in search of the light they can grow toward. She thinks that's all of them, in the war, in life. Draco Malfoy had come like a large, sharp stone, shoved into the tender framing of her bark. And as she grew, he grew into her, and her around him, until he

became a part of her. Some foreign, embedded object that no one can really understand how it got there, or why the growth of the tree shaped to it instead of dislodging it.

She can't remove him from herself. Only he would be able to do so, and if he wanted to, he would have to hack and peel, splinter and dig. It wouldn't break her if he walked away, if he left her in the tide of war that she had truly first found him. But it would leave behind a hole, shaped to fit only him, and only him ever again.

He knows her in every moment, in every way. He knows her in her happiness, in the dark, in her breakdown, in the passion that can overcome her. He knows her when she doesn't know herself, when she is a killer, when she is stripped to the basics of her humanity. He knows her when the world is falling apart, and when she is fighting to hold it together. He knows her gutted and filled up. He has been with her as she wound and wound, and he has wound with her. Searching for the light, or winding her around himself when they can't find it. He knows her in the worst ways - in the ways she wouldn't tell other people, ever. He knows her war, because it is theirs.

He knew her when all she knew was him. It had been him. It has always been him, through most of the war, through the hardest things she's ever known. Somehow, it has been him.

"Don't hurt yourself, Granger."

"Huh?" She snaps out of her daze, meeting his eyes and smiling at the leaf that hits his cheek.

"You look like your oversized brain is going to explode."

There's a faint curl to the corners of his lips, and his eyes are on her hair. She reaches up tentatively, and locates two leaves stuck in her curls. Of course he didn't tell her that, the prat. She looks down at the red and green leaf and opens her palm, letting the wind take it in flight.

"Know the feeling, Malfoy? I suppose it happens quite often when you only have a handful of brain cells." She stares at his hair long and hard, until he grows self-conscious enough to run his fingers through it and take out any leaves.

He glares at her when he finds nothing but a smug look on her face. "Does it?"

She knows that was meant to turn the tables on her, but she doesn't let it. "*Yes*,"

she says very slowly, and gives him an encouraging smile. He sneers, she grins. "Going somewhere?"

"Headquarters."

"Oh."

He looks hesitant, and it isn't often he forgets to cover up his lack of certainty, so she stares. "I'll probably be back here tomorrow."

"Oh." It's her turn to look hesitant and his to stare too hard. She never knows what to do when he's tracking her every movement and she's not occupied with his own. It flusters her, and she speaks before she decides if she wants to. "It's my birthday tomorrow."

"I know."

She didn't think he would, but she covers her surprise by looking at his feet. "I'll be going to the Burrow for cake and dinner. Youcancomeifyouwant. I'll be here all day except for that. And…you know, here at night."

Molly will probably assume she'll be staying there, but if Draco is going to be here, she doesn't want to miss him. She knows he wouldn't come to the Burrow and she wants to see him. It's probably going to be hard to deny Molly, but Harry and Ginny will have it harder. Molly looked anything but approving when the two had left with Hermione after dinner last night. *I don't understand why you all can't stay here instead of traveling back to the safe house. You shouldn't be traveling that much, and this is...* And then Molly had cut off at the very red faces of her daughter and her boyfriend.

"Alright." Draco gives her a nod, and she nods back at him.

Day: 1567; Hour: 12

Draco leaves for Headquarters with some muttered goodbye in his kiss. She watches him Portkey away, and doesn't notice that Harry and Ginny have emerged from the kitchen until they speak.

"Still weird."

"Really weird."

"It..." Harry trails off and makes a face. "It really creeps me out."

I'm scarred, Harry had said the first time he caught a glimpse of her fingers on Draco's neck and his head lowering. *We already know that, Potter*, Draco had said, and that had been the end of it. No other comments, no strange looks, no anything she might have expected.

Hermione rolls her eyes, but she knows Harry deserves time to grasp it. Some days she has trouble grasping it too. He's been better than she could have hoped.

"It's a little scary." Ginny holds up two fingers, an inch between them, and laughs.

Hermione gives a small smile to herself, looking back to where he was last standing. "I know."

Day: 1568; Hour: 1

Something is wrong. Something is very, very, wrong, and her eyes snap open at the scream somewhere below her. She lurches upward, her hair flying forward in sweat dampened curls, staring at the flames eating at the walls. She has to punch her thigh twice to convince herself it's not a dream. She had dreams that felt just as real as this, and the pain in dreams was always very real to her dream-self. But this...the heat, the crackle of flames, the ache from her fist.

"Hermione!"

She throws herself out of the bed, grabbing her wand as she rolls to her feet. There isn't a fireplace, there had been no candles in her room, and she doesn't think Harry and Ginny would light any for effect and let it get this out of control. She slams her feet into her boots, her body jerking left and right between her trunk and the door in indecision before going right. The brass knob scorches her palm and she hisses, shaking it out, and promptly blows the doors off the hinges.

"Hermione!"

"Here!" she yells back, and can hear the tight edge of panic matching Harry's.

The roof is raining chunks of fire, flames dancing closer to her feet along the floor. She runs toward the staircase, her laces smacking against her bare calves, and comes to a halt when she doesn't *find* any stairs. It's only a drop-off to the floor below, the fire high and angry. She can't see anything below from the dark cloud of smoke and blur of heat, and then it is Harry, soaring up through the flames and

ashes.

"Get on!" Ginny yells from behind him, and the broom swerves, offering her just enough room between the redhead and the fire at the end.

Hermione quickly puts out the flames with a wave of her wand, the spell simple with such a small fire, and throws her leg over the broom. The second she wraps her arms around Ginny, they are off again with a jerk. "Why aren't we Apparating or--?" It's not like they'll ever be coming back to a safe house that had burned to debris.

"We can't! Aim for the ground! Duck now!" Harry yells back.

She can see him raise his arm and duck his head, and the two women follow his example. Hermione squeezes her eyes shut as the window shatters, glass flying back to tug at her skin. She gasps in the colder air, and her stomach clenches as she opens her eyes. She only gets a glimpse at the ground before it is all sky, the three of them spinning straight up into the air.

Ginny's thin fingers clasp around Hermione's arm, squeezing but not pulling away the death grip. The heat fades quickly from her back, and she's shaking in her father's old T-shirt and her pajama shorts from the frosty night air, the flight, and her adrenaline. Harry straightens the broom, and they circle the flaming carcass of a safe house from birds-eye.

"I don't see anything," Ginny huffs out, and then breaks into a fit of coughs. Hermione loosens her grip, but her eyes continue searching for any movement or figure. "There's no way a fire spread that fast by accident."

"And if we couldn't Apparate out, someone had to put wards up." Hermione coughs, the smoke sitting heavy in her lungs and the cold air too crisp.

"I'm going to fly lower, so we can search..." Harry trails off, and Hermione feels it too. "Shit."

The broom nearly tips them over when Harry shifts to reach into his pocket, the extra weight threatening to roll them. "What is it?"

"Headquarters."

Her Portkey to Headquarters is in her...trunk. Hermione looks back down at the house as it crumbles, and her heart squeezes painfully. Her *pictures*, her notes, her books, her clothes, her Phoenix band, all of her possessions for the past four years.

She has a letter from *Neville* in her trunk, and *pictures*, and the flower Justin gave her two summers ago, and Luna's jar of 'good luck' bugs that Hermione couldn't see or had ever heard of.

"Oh, no," she whispers, only *just* holding back from grabbing the broom and forcing them back.

"What's wrong?"

"My trunk." Is that her voice? She reaches up to wipe at her face, catching wetness on her skin.

There is silence for a moment, because they all know it's too late to do anything about it. She can also feel the heat from the coin in her pocket, and it doesn't matter. The safe house was just attacked, and now they are getting called to Headquarters. She just lost most the physical representations of her friends, but something bigger is going on now.

This is war. Suck it up, Granger. She shakes her head, clenches her jaw. *Is that your brave face, Hermione?* Neville laughs inside her head. *I don't think that's your brave face. Go, rawr. No laughing! Raaawr! Brave face!*

"Rawr," she chokes out.

"What?"

Oh, Jesus. *Get it together*, she snaps at herself. *They're just stupid things, it's not like you'll forget. Stupid things, stupid things, stupid…* "Does anyone have a Portkey?"

"Yeah. I'm going to put it in my palm, and both of you will put a finger on it. Alright?" Harry's already flicking open the box, and he turns toward them as much as he can. "Make sure you keep your finger on it."

Harry stretches his arm back, and the broom sways as she and Ginny rush to touch what looks like an old toothpaste cap. Feeling that pull at her bellybutton was always a little disconcerting, but feeling it while hovering far into the sky is not something she'll ever want to repeat. The broom spins them madly, and they cling to one another, Hermione's thighs locked around the ridiculously thin handle.

The broom hits a tree branch and sends them end over front twice, before they plummet headfirst toward the ground. "Lean back, lean back!" Harry screams, and

they straighten just two meters from the earth with a collective gasp.

"And you wonder why I hate broo--" Her sentence cuts off in a gurgle of loud sound.

Her eyes are wide on the unguarded gates, the left hanging crookedly, and the right completely blown out onto the lawn. There's screaming in the distance, and high above the towering manor, a snake slithers from the mouth of a skull and tangles in the clouds.

Forty-Six

Day: 1568; Hour: 1

"Left!" Harry orders, and they flip sideways, two green jets nearly skimming their shoes.

"*Lumos*!" Hermione yells, pointing her wand over the line of Harry and Ginny's shoulders, and the two of them cast quick Stunning spells.

"Right," Harry directs, and they pull upright again, Harry bringing the broom to the ground.

Hermione binds both the Death Eaters before she's off the broom, and looks at three other bodies on the ground. All three are dead, one of them with their arm and half their face charred. Panic, and she shoves it back.

"I don't think we were the only safe house to wake up with the place on fire."

"This was their plan. That's why they only put the anti-Apparition wards up before setting the place on fire. They didn't have time to come in and kill us, because they had to get here. They're *all* going to be here. From the new leaders to the new recruits. It's the bloody fucking Graveyard all over again." Harry has gone as white as the moon, but there's a brilliant spark of hunger in his eyes that scares her.

She looks up toward the manor, her body urging her to run in that direction. Draco is supposed to be there. McGonagall, Lupin, Anthony... Hermione stops the list of names in her head at the *pop*, jerking her wand up as she turns to face behind her. Three men stare back at her as they get their footing, and then lift shocked eyes above her head. A string of curses, and then four more people appear. *This is a team* , she thinks automatically.

"Hermione," Harry calls, and hits her arm. She looks down at his shirt, clutched in his hand. "Put this on. Give me yours. Hurry."

She gives him a look like he's crazy, but he moves past her, rushing whispers at the people who just came. "The orange," Ginny tells her, her wand trained on the gates, and Hermione turns her back toward the people, yanking her shirt off. She pulls Harry's on quickly, smelling sweat, smoke, and him, and uses her wand to cut to ribbons the shirt she's slept in since she was a child.

"If you can't Apparate here, go as far into the woods as it takes. The wards have to end somewhere. When you bring them to Mungo's, I want the two of you to come back. You're the transporters, alright? Anyone coming in injured, bring them out. Got it?" Harry sounds frantic but in control, and the two men nod.

Hermione quickly passes out the strips of orange, and by the time she's done, there's nineteen of them wearing them. "Give one to anyone else going in," she tells one of the appointed transporters, shoving the strips into his hand before bending to tie her boots.

"There's seventeen of us going in. Five of us will break to the left, five to the right, and seven, straight. At the willow tree--" Harry starts laying out the plan.

"What willow tree?" a man asks, double knotting the jagged strip of orange.

"The gigantic tree in the middle of the lawn. It's about seven meters from the porch," another man hisses, and he looks at all of them like they're idiots.

"No one moves forward until all three are there," Harry continues, his words punctuated by the looks he keeps throwing toward the manor. "We can't know the situation this far away, so we will go on one of two plans when we're there. Plan one, we attack as an entire unit, spreading out only as far as the scope of Death Eaters in the front. Plan two, we split up into teams again, taking the left and right, and straight into the house. Clear?"

No one questions him, though she doesn't expect them to. Harry quickly splits them up, pushing her and Ginny to the left, and joining them a moment later. They take off past the gates in a line, spread out enough to be of assistance but also not leaving any space unchecked to the left of the grounds. She can make out the flash of red in the moonlight to her left, and the shine of Harry's skin on her right, but they are far enough away that she almost feels alone. But this is okay, because she knows how to stand on her own. Her wand swings from side to side with every fall of her foot, her eyes scanning through the deep blue of darkness. It's hard to see in the depth of night, under the mass of tree foliage, but it also means it's harder for *them* to see her.

There's a lump in the grass to her right, and she can make out the white shirt before she sees skin. Harry pauses, flipping the person onto their back and immediately recoiling. He continues without checking for a pulse, whatever he saw being enough proof. Hermione can make out the two slumped figures of the guards, one across the stairs and the other in front of the door. She can see seven, ten, eleven other bodies now, six black hoods rising from the grass, all motionless.

The screams and explosions are so loud now, they sound as if they are just a space in front of her. The entire manor sounds like it's about to crumble to its dungeon floor at any moment, and smoke billows up into the sky from the back lawn. Colors soar past the windows, bodies running forward or flying back. A chunk of the wall on the third floor blows out, a hundred pieces against a cloud of dark purple light. A Death Eater follows a moment later, tumbling through the air and hitting the ground with a sound that makes her stomach turn. Another, and then a third.

She turns for the willow tree, and three steps to her right gives her a new angle. She can see the back of Lupin now, feet planted on top of a desk. Color streams arc out around him as he spins his arm above his head, then thrusts his wand out in front of him toward an enemy she can't see. The force of his magic billows his robes out behind him, a ball of fire shoots across the sky in the back, and an explosion from the first floor breaks the porch in half.

There's a woman crawling up the path to the porch, and Hermione doesn't know if she is friend or foe. There is nothing they can do for her anyway. They have no Portkeys and they can't Apparate. If the Healers are still alive, they are no doubt watching for the red sparks that would beckon them. But in a fight like this…there's only so much anyone could do. There won't be enough Healers or time. The healing squad was usually posted at the outskirts of a battle, and while it was dangerous, they had distance and protection. Here, they have none, and while it will not stop them, it'll severely limit the amount of people they can save.

They stand in a thick, tense silence at the willow, calming their breathing, and waiting for the team on the right to join them. Hermione feels as if she is standing neck deep in water, a current threatening to take her, and doing her best to not move. It's maddening, and she wants to scream, run, and *fight*. Her heart is pounding erratically, because she is terrified of what she is about to face, but far more afraid that she is not getting there quick enough.

"Where are you going?" Ginny asks this in a breath, so low it could pass for wind five people away.

"Sky," Harry whispers back. "Need layout. Only one with broom. Hit them from above."

Hermione looks over at him, his bare toes just touching the blades of grass as he hovers on his broom. He's staring off at the top of the house, and his face is set in a determination she's seen too many times. She had been wondering if he would do this, but she hadn't decided if it was a good idea or not. He would be flying alone, and while his skills are impressive, birds fly all their lives and still get shot from the

sky.

"Let me ride in back. Backup."

Harry's jaw clenches, and he shakes his head once. She knows what he's thinking. *It's the fucking Graveyard all over again*, he had said - a battle that she and Ginny had been kept away from. He probably wants to take them somewhere else and make them stay there. He doesn't have that choice, though. *No one had a choice,* yells Draco in her head, and she agrees. No one has a choice in this.

"Too dangerous. Fly better, faster, alone. I--" He is cut off by Ginny's lips on his, and Hermione blinks to the ground, to the manor, and back again.

"Go to the gates," he says, and though it is barely words, she can taste his desperation on the air around her. "Take Hermione and go back to--"

Ginny shakes her head at him, kisses him again. The team from the right joins them, and Harry digs holes into Ginny's eyes and then hers. "Be safe," he mouths.

"Be safe," Hermione whispers back.

The pleading is gone from his eyes when he grabs one of the men from the middle team and pulls him over. He points five fingers to the left, five to the right, and six to the door. There can be no other plans now. They can only fight the best they can, and hopefully, just maybe, they will survive. Harry gives a solid nod, and doesn't turn to look at them again as he kicks off into the sky.

Ginny's eyes are watery when she turns them toward Hermione, so she squeezes her arm before falling in line with the rest of their team. A sort of *anticipation* begins to build in her chest. Harry had said they will all be here, and while the thought makes her hands shake, she can't help the swell that blisters her insides. That cautioned, unavoidable, impossible hope that is the restitution of the human soul. The salvation in their darkest moments, and at times, the malicious storm that sends them there. Hope is a beautiful cruelty, and it *rages* on, and on, through wars, humanity, and inside her now.

Maybe this is it. Maybe if they can survive this, and win this... Maybe this is it. She remembers what Draco said, after the Graveyard. The Death Eaters would rebuild, collect information, form a plan, and then fight to the death. This has to be it, their last stand. If light can emerge from the dark, if dawn proves them victorious, then maybe, maybe. In her head, it is if all the battles and these long years have merged into a single, burning moment. The blinding force had taken her

over four years ago, or from the real beginning, *twelve years*, when a little girl met two boys, a world, and a war that was her destiny. That force took her, blowing her through masses of time of the things she has gained and loved, and what she has lost bitterly, and it has led her here. As if there could have never been another ending. This is the one that counts. This is the one where all of it really matters.

Yellow, red, and green darts at them not a second after they round the corner of the house. Hermione throws up a shield, the yellow bursting into grey smoke in front of Ginny's face. The two men next to her return their own curses, the four Death Eaters blocking and casting, one falling Stunned or dead. Past them, she can see the figures through wisps of smoke, a mix of hoods and heads of hair, a single flash of orange.

A jet of blue and then a crowd of arrows fly at them, and Hermione hits them into the side of the house with a wave of her wand. She fires back Binding, Blinding, and Stunning spells in rapid succession, careful not to cast anything too difficult to preserve her energy. Liquid splashes across her left side, and she doesn't dare turn toward the roaring screams or the red that explodes in her peripheral.

Ginny's shoulder hits hers on her right, and the redhead spins to press her back to Hermione's. She rolls back a second later, and colors jet around and over them as a herd of footfalls and heavy breathing reach the back of her ears. The Death Eaters are powerless against the tide of spells, and they fall almost simultaneously as a large group of people rush forward around her team.

Hermione just begins to run forward when there is a rumble from the house, and then an explosion of sound covers all other noise as all the windows on the second floor blow out. Glass glitters in the sky, the moon catching them like stars, and everything is still for half a breath. The shattering sound is vacuumed to silence, and then there's a roaring in her ears as the glass rains down on them in a billion little shards. It covers their skin like faerie dust, making them shine in the darkness.

Draco, she thinks suddenly, shaking off the glass and the stings, a fierce need boiling hotly up her belly. She tries to shove it away, this angry yearning, because she knows there isn't anything she can do about it. She has to defend herself, look out for the people around her, and that's all she can do. She can't afford to worry about people she can't possibly protect - lack of focus in battle meant a lack of survival, Moody had said from day *one*. Constant-- Her heart skips at least two beats when she sees a head of white hair, but the smoke clears, and it was never him.

Any semblance of order or control they had managed to obtain once they had arrived at the gates is now completely gone. The battle is new, but the situation is so

familiar it rips at the same internal scars of fear. The cloud of smoke, the chaos, the small groups of teams and the individuals fighting what might be the wrong side or the right, but they don't likely know for sure. She trips over bodies, the spells flying all around, and if she were to tilt the world onto its side, it would look like it was raining rainbows. There are screams, the spontaneous bursts of crying, and the *stench*.

Sulfur, gasoline, the bite of blood, sweat, earth, crisp cold, and smoke. It fuses into a scent only labeled war in her mind, but that forms a dozen sprawling emotions. This is the scent she can't seem to wash from her clothes, that steals peace from her sleep. That she sometimes convinces herself is *really* there, in the dark, when she is alone, and cannot cloud her senses with soap, aftershave, man, *him*.

She spots a line of blue heading for Ginny, and quickly tries to pull the girl forward just as Ginny tries to pull her back. The tiny fragments of glass on Ginny's arm bite into her palm, scraping skin and digging in. Neither one moves more than an inch in the second it takes for Hermione to grunt in surprise, something hitting her between her shoulder blades. A freezing cold sensation travels faster than the blood through her veins, along her bones, and spiderwebs out across every bit of her.

She is paralyzed, the air around her turning to a fog of vapor from her coldness, and it only takes her a second to recognize the curse. She had seen it twice on a battlefield; the way it froze the entire body in ice for two seconds, just long enough for another spell to hit, and shatter them like ice cubes between her father's teeth. One never saw a person seem to turn to glass and break to pieces without remembering it.

She has just another second for the horror to come down like a blizzard through the winter inside of her, and then she is unfrozen. Her body pumps back into life, searing heat into all that coldness, and the agony of it sends her to her knees. Everything feels razor sharp, like her bones were just ground into points and disconnected to stab through all that sensitive tissue and human makeup. Her heartbeat trips over itself, cramping her chest, then pounds hard and quick. Ginny is grabbing her arm, and likely the reason why the second spell that always followed did not do so this time. Likely the reason she wasn't in a couple dozen pieces on the ground.

She stumbles to her feet, trying to concentrate and break through the haze of pain, when something hits her with the force of a Bludger in her gut. There isn't a physical impact, just an extreme amount of pressure, ripping all the oxygen up and

out of her mouth. She flies backwards, her feet leaving the ground as she is hurled through the air. Her legs, head, and arms whip forward, hunching over the pressure against her gut, until her body is led backwards through the air by only the curve of her back.

Wind rushes past her, bodies and duels flashing by, as Ginny's scream of her name disappears into a new cacophony of sound. *This must be the second part*, she thinks, and then she is ripped to the ground by her leg. Her bum hits the earth with a jolt, and she hisses pain through her teeth, the ache from the first curse still slow to fade. She swings her arm up, wand out, but there's already one pressing into the corner of her eye.

She blinks, wondering briefly if she is dead. If she were to meet up with him in Heaven, Hell, or wherever it is that souls go or they should find themselves, she would absolutely not put it past Fred to greet her in such a manner. And then cackle at her for getting scared. But then she knows it is George who stares down at her, a flash of recognition and then fear burning in his eyes. He lowers his wand and grabs her arm, pulling her up carefully.

"Alright, Hermione?"

"Yes," she whispers, and repeats it louder so he can hear her. She has not seen him in so long, but somehow it makes sense to see him here before she saw him across his family's table. Somehow it makes *perfect* sense.

There is a circle of protection around them, the backs she does not recognize, and then flashes of orange hair. Charlie, Molly, and Arthur. Molly sends her a frazzled look over her shoulder, a shield of lavender bursting forth from her wand. Hermione reaches forward to squeeze George's arm in the few moments of reprieve. There is no time for emotions or the things that should be said.

"I have to get back to my team." She doesn't think she should tell him about Ginny, because she isn't sure how well he's handling this.

"We're all the same team now. It's not safe."

"I have to."

George looks torn, but he's known her since she was a child, and there's no denying what her stance means. "I'll go with you."

Day: 1568; Hour: 2

Hermione breathes raggedly, the oxygen rasping into her lungs as she presses her back to the wall. She edges to the corner, her eyes scanning quickly, back and forth. There is hardly any smoke here, but she can still see the wisps of it out in front of her, and knows the denseness that lies beyond. At times the thickness blots out the moonlight, and there is nothing but complete darkness. Running through it is almost like a strobe light to her eyes -- faint light and then back to consuming black, like light blinking around her soaring body. She can hear loud crying behind her, and guesses that someone recognized one of the bodies lying at the bottom of the drained out swimming pool. Two of the walls are blown out on the pool house, and the East side of the top floor has collapsed to the first. The top floor is sitting at a slant, and it will only take a couple strong, wayward spells until the whole thing levels.

George and an Auror he called Higs had come with her to find her team. By the time they fought their way back to the spot, they were gone. It was an hour later before they found Ginny, and fifteen minutes after, Hermione had lost all of them. She had caught sight of McGonagall twice, a flash that could have been Ron, and had seen a glimpse of Harry with a look so vicious she almost didn't recognize him.

The pinky and ring finger of her left hand are badly broken, but the Crushing curse had been a breath from her neck, so she considers herself lucky. There is a constant throbbing pain beneath her arm, and a gash across her thigh staining her leg red. There had been a few minor hexes she strongly believed came from her own side - the most damaging had blinded her for a terrifying four seconds before she remembered the counter-spell.

Her head jerks back as someone screams from above her. She glances up at the wall of the top floor, spotting the red spark through the window. She flies around the corner, her wand scanning over bodies in the flickering torchlight, before landing on the staircase. Two Death Eaters are running up to the top floor, and she Binds one of them, their body freezing before falling backwards and knocking down the steps. The other Death Eater yells the Killing Curse at her, and she waves her wand quickly, turning the stairs into a slide. His spell shoots into the ground a foot in front of her as he falls forward. She Binds him through the haze of green in her vision, and runs forward as someone screams again.

She turns the slide back into stairs, vaulting the bound bodies and flying up the staircase. She's halfway up when her foot gets stuck on something and she falls forward. Her knees collide with the steps and the side of her face bangs off the edge of a stair. Heat suffuses her face, and then pain, blood rolling to her lips as she unlocks her teeth from her tongue.

She's whipped up into the air with a moan before she can even notice the hard, jagged pieces of her shattered teeth. Her back hits the ceiling, her skull rattling and the floor groaning uneasily with the force. She gasps in a breath, and laughter starts up behind her as she falls forward, hanging upside down. Blood, saliva, and shards of her teeth drip from the bed of her tongue to the roof of her mouth, sliding out over her upper lip. She's dangling in the air by her feet, some invisible force holding them together and flinging her around like a doll.

"Release us from the binds, you idiot!"

"In a minute."

She brings her eyes up to the Death Eater across from her, reaching up to shove her hair from her vision. There's a pressure against her ankles and sore knees, and she's sent plummeting toward the stairs before she can even see him.

She thrusts her arms out above her head, her elbows buckling and then straightening as her palms hit a step hard enough to sent jolts of pain to her temples. She clenches her teeth on a groan of determination, her arms wobbling from her effort and the pressure shoving her down, when the laughter starts again. She closes her eyes, her sight useless from her hair, and concentrates on the sound. She's done it before, and she can do it again. Her sight is not everything, and she takes the chance of smashing her skull by yanking a hand away to take aim.

She knows she's hit her target when the force stops trying to shove her through the staircase. Her legs fall, cracking off the steps, and she slides on her back, head first down the stairs. She flings her hand out, latching onto one of the spindles and tightening her upper body. Her lower half curves to a jerky halt, and she only allows herself a breath before getting to her feet. She shakes out her strained arm, Stunning the three Death Eaters to silence them and still their movements. Quickly, she Levitates them to lie face down at the bottom of the drained pool, and they match the appearance of the dead they join there.

She scans behind her and then runs back up the stairs, not knowing if the man had screamed again while her blood had been rushing in her ears. She spits the blood and tooth shards from her mouth, sweeping her tongue back to find two jagged teeth, half of one completely gone. The floor groans two steps onto the landing, and she casts a Lumos into the dark corners to make sure it's clear. The only movement besides herself is a frog hopping over the bodies on the ground. Hermione casts quickly between its hops, making sure it's not someone in Animagus form, before scoping the room one more time.

She steps carefully, avoiding the corpses, and trying to feel out the floor under her foot. Her breath is rushing, lights firing past the windows, and the air is a little more clear from the smoke this high up. She has to walk at a slant toward the window she had first spotted the red sparks in, keeping her light low in case someone notices it from the ground and decides to make it a target. She feels like she just stepped into a horror film; the sprawl of bodies, the dark, the way the sound is just a little duller up here.

"Medical," she rasps, and clears her throat, straining her ears for any grunt or whine of noise.

If there is one, she can't hear it over the sounds of the battle. She doesn't even know where the medical team is to bring the person there, but she can't ignore a call for help. Her light lands on a man by the window, his frozen eyes shining at her through the dark, his stomach ripped open. She feels her own heave at the tangle of intestines protruding from his wound, red cords jumbled in a mess of raw tissue and blood. She slaps her hand over her mouth and flashes her eyes up to the window.

Rapid successions. Her life is a scramble of rapid successions. She's not sure if she is imagining the sight that greets her from the window, but she is nearly positive it is Ron and Harry, their wands trained on *each other* in the light of spells. She gasps back against her gag reflex, choking, and the floor gives a crack as she lurches forward. The memory of the dungeon, of dull green eyes, slams out of her brain with all the power of the spell that hits the side of the structure. The pool house lurches to the side, groaning loudly, and her heart doesn't even hit a beat before another force hits.

The groan turns into a growl, and then it's *screaming* as she runs forward. The floor is cracking, straining, falling through, and the walls begin crumbling down on the first floor. *Pound, pound, pound*, her heart, her feet. The ground slides, angling down under her feet as she runs to a destination she gives no thought to, her mind on an autopilot the war created. The nearest exit, the closest escape, *survival, survival*, and then she's sailing through a window. Her body rams through the glass, her arms over her face and head, and the shatter disappears into the shrieking of the collapsing house.

She throws her arms out, rotating them twice in an attempt to fly or keep her body straight. Her toes hit the ground with such a force she can feel several cracks shoot up from her feet to her head. Her angle sends her to her knees, and her palms catch her before her face can slam into the ground. A heavy cloud of debris rushes over her, choking her breath when she gasps, and she coughs it all back out. She smothers her mouth against her arm, squeezing her eyes, as wood and plaster

smack against her body and the dust coats her lungs.

Harry and Ron, she remembers, coughing so hard it feels like her brain is trying to squeeze out of the pores on her forehead. She feels heat sear past her shoulder, and she chokes back her breath, jerking to her left. She opens her eyes, the dust beginning to settle, but she still can't see anything with the way it's blocking out the moonlight. She crawls quickly to her left, using the momentum to get her feet under her, and whines at the shocks of pain in her feet and her right ankle.

There's a crack behind her at the noise, and she whips toward it, staggering with her wand up. She can just make out a hood through the smoke, and she has to drop to her knees to avoid the spell flying at her head. She opens her mouth to cast her own, but the dust is thick along her tongue and throat, and no word breaks the barrier.

She flings herself to the side at the next streak of black, swallowing, swallowing, coughing past the desert of her vocal chords. She rasps out a spell, twice, before a weak stream of water comes out of her wand, and she shoves it into her mouth. She swallows it down, the water and dust, and it scrapes along her throat. The Death Eater clears the smoke that hid him, stepping close enough for her to make out his cocked head and grin.

"Killing yourself just takes the fun out for m--" She cuts him off by turning her wand on him, and he's just choking over the beginning of the Curse when she finishes hers.

She pulls in ragged breaths, bracing for the pain as she forces herself to her feet again. She scans the smoke, carefully revolving her ankle to work out the sprain, and sends another Curse at the flash of a mask to her left. She gives herself a second more and then takes off, awkward-footed, toward where she last saw Harry and Ron.

She kills two more Death Eaters, and an Auror she vaguely knows kills a third in assistance, before she's made it more than three meters. The Curse is at the back of her tongue at the staggering runners breaking through the smoke, but they aren't her enemies. Instead it is Toad and Sam bursting through, Sam's arm shaking so badly there isn't a single way he could hit a target.

Toad looks at her without even seeing her, or at least she's guessing, judging by the Binding spell he throws her way. She blocks it quickly, and it is through the glimmer of her Shielding charm that it registers. Both their faces are pale white, eyes wide, and she's not sure if they're going to faint or vomit first.

She doesn't have time to be sorry. "Gr..Gran--"

She shakes her head, shoving a finger against her lips as she rushes toward them. "Are you injured?"

"It's not bad," Sam whispers, pressing his hand to his side, but she can see the blood still flowing out between and over his fingers.

Hermione almost keeps running. The image of her friends is burning in her mind and shouting out priorities. But she knows these are kids in front of her, that they are scared and alone, and she knows that kind of fear. She remembers Sam's easy smile, and then Justin. Justin in her head, staring up at her from the ground while she stood on a roof, not knowing it was goodbye.

She tears his hand away, ordering Toad to scan the area around them. She has to tell him twice before it sinks in, and he circles the area. Sam keeps his wand aimed behind her back, and she jerks his shirt up. He falls limply into her shoulder and she pushes him back, wiping her hand over the wound to clear the blood.

He screams and she jerks forward in panic. "Shut up, shut up," she hisses into his ear, and then gets a hold of herself when green light doesn't consume her vision. "You're going to be alright, Sam. Just fine. Now bite this."

She pushes a wad of his shirt against his mouth, and shoves it in when he opens, his fingers digging into her shoulder. He bites down and she lowers her head to squint through the faint moonlight, wiping the blood away again, and quickly stitching his wound. It's a rough line, and she pulls the skin too tight, but it will have to do.

"If you're not okay to fight, you two need to head into the woods." She jerks her head to where the fire is crawling across the top of the smoke, across the sky. The leaves and branches are burning brightly, aided by wayward spells. The trees crack, groan, and thud as they fall, wrapping the battle in a burning circle.

"We're okay." Sam nods, shakes his head, and nods again.

"If you change your mind, keep running until you can Apparate out. Go somewhere safe...*anywhere* but here."

"We'll go back to the safe house." Sam keeps talking but she doesn't hear him.

"Be safe." She nods at him and pulls away, nodding to Toad as she begins running

again. *Harry, Ron, Harry, Ron*.

The two of them follow her, a rush of footsteps and then their arms brushing against hers. She's surprised, but she doesn't know why. The two of them cast mostly Stunning and Binding spells, but she can't find it within herself to tell them to try differently. She won't tell them what they are supposed to do. She won't tell them why they have to. This is their first battle, it might be the last, and if they don't have to know...

Heave, coldness, sulfur. The Death Eater drops, and she kills the second one as they try to break their bindings. Toad tries it after that, but it just turns to a ring of green smoke in front of him. There's a pain in her chest that beats anything else from her body, and in her mind, it is just one word: *go, go, go, go*.

They fight their way through the smoke and dark figures, and she tries to remember the direction the fountain will be. She can't stop her eyes from dropping to the ground at every body they come across. She scans the black cloaks, the shine of masks, the pajama pants, the orange bands, and doesn't find anyone she knows. It only makes her fight harder, faster, as if it will all change if she doesn't *go, go, go*.

The smoke is only getting thicker, a body hurtling across her line of vision. There's a running body of fire to her left, the screams blending into a mountain of sound. Colors fly all around them, sparks light the sky, and then she is there.

"Harry!" Sam gasps at the side of her head, and this is how she knows.

She turns sharply, waving at the smoke, her eyes falling on the destroyed fountain she had spotted next to them through the window. Her heart is on a rampage, fear blistering and swelling her up. There are five people dueling to the left of the fountain, and to the right is where she finds them. She freezes, Ron's back to her as he kneels on the ground, his shirt a mess of red. Harry stands in front of him, facing her, and though his face is twisted with fury, his hand is shaking.

She can't see his eyes, but she knows anyway. "Harry!" she screams, her voice tearing out of her throat, uncaring to the enemies that find her.

She breaks into motion, *gogogogogo*, her blood throbbing, her head spinning, and her body shaking. She digs harder, yelling out a Stunning spell at Harry, her voice coming out in a shriek. Harry falls, Ron jerks forward, and then a bolt of green tears the world in half. Tears it right in half in front of her, and takes her heart with it.

Ron's head whips to the side, orange hair blowing up in the wind of the

movement, and Hermione stumbles to her knees the second Ron's shoulder hits the ground. She sucks in a breath, and a scream rips itself from her gut. Rips like a hook from the bottom of her stomach, shredding up through her insides, through her heart, and wrenches it out of her mouth. It feels exactly like that. It feels like the world just exploded from inside her.

No. Nonononononono. Her body is heaving, her vision is all a mass blur, and she's on her feet. She doesn't even feel her body. There is just a terrible coldness spreading inside of her, so cold it burns, and she can't believe it. She shoots across the field, some spell hitting her in her back, *but she can not feel it*.

It's just the blob of red in her vision, the one she is rapidly approaching, and no other thoughts exist. Not until she proves it wrong. Not until she laughs in its *face* for being so incredibly wrong. Wrong, wrong, *wrong*! It was a different spell, it didn't touch him, he's fine, he--

"No!" she screams brokenly, sobs, something colliding into her side, slamming into her stomach.

She elbows, punches, scratches, and kicks blindly. She can't take her eyes off the red, the red, the green, the red. There is screaming in her ear, blood on her hands, and fingers wrap around her flailing wrists. Her body is thrown back and forth, her head snapping. She loses her footing under the violent shaking as she tries to twist, spin, thrust away. She kicks out a foot, meeting something solid, and kicks again, but the shaking just gets harder.

She is spun away from the red, away from where she *needs* to be. "Hermione!"

Her head snaps back, and it's white in her vision now. Pure white, and pale white, and then red again. Red, but not the kind she *wantsneedsnow*. "Let go of me!"

"It's not him! It isn't him! It's not fucking Weasley!" This is repeated, over and over again, but she doesn't understand. "Stop! *Stop*! It's not *him*! Polyjuice, fucking *Christ*!"

Polyjuice? Polyjuice. The world swims around her. She is deaf for several seconds, and then a distant rumble, climbing, *climbing*. Her nails retract from the depth of his skin, her foot colliding with the ground instead of his leg. Her body sags, her vision sways, and her shoulders jerk with a heavy sob. "What?"

"I *promise*. I swear to God." Draco. *Draco, Draco, Draco*. "It's not Weasley."

"How..." He lifts her up, but she can't feel her feet. She can't get past the shock, the eruption of emotions that had torn her open. "How..."

"I'll tell you how when we're not in the middle of a battle, Granger. Suck it up." She would be on the ground if he wasn't holding her so tightly to him. His jaw is pressed against her temple, and she can feel his arm moving, his wand scanning.

She tries to breathe, to break through the dense cloud of anguish that had stolen her mind. "Hermione."

She looks up, her watery eyes peeking over Draco's shoulder, and to bright green. Bright, shiny green, unowned by any Curse. She can't read Harry's face. There are too many things there, and too many in her head. "Harry..."

"It wasn't him. It was never him." Bitterness, despair, anger. "I'll tell you-- Don't look. You know they keep form."

"Right." She swallows, shakes her head, shakes it again. "You... You're sure?"

"Positive," Draco bites OUT, and her forehead hits his shoulder.

One breath, two, three and she pushes away. Her hand is shaking when she runs it over her face, and she winces at the pull of wounds, the sticky thickness of dust and blood. It wasn't him. *It Isn't him.* She shoves a hand against her chest, rubbing at an ache that shouldn't be there. She has just watched one of her best friends die, even if it *isn't* him. She had still felt it like it was. Still has the image in her head.

"Wait, it was never him, did you--"

"Weasley is alive, Granger. I can't say the same for us if you don't shut up and *move*."

Right. Right, this is war. Ron is alive, the Death Eater pretending to be him is dead, and that's all it is. That's all it's allowed to be, because she can't lose her mind right now. If she were to look over, it would look like him. It would look like him, feel like him, but it isn't him. Ron is fine, wherever he is on this forsaken field, and it is time to move.

Day: 1568; Hour: 3

It looks like a shooting star for a moment, the yellow-white ball with the gleaming, tangling line of color following after it. It smashes into something ahead

of her, a groaning sound following it. Hermione casts over her shoulder, and turns her head back in time to see the smoke blow away. The air is clear only for a second, before the space in front of her is lit with fire. She casts to repel the flames as she launches herself into the air, pain crackling up her legs as she vaults over the fallen tree.

She had lost them in the smoke, Harry's blood-smeared back the last thing she saw before two Death Eaters took up her vision. The more she fought them, weaving herself into the thick of the battle, the more she separated herself from the team. She had won, temporarily, more enemies at her back the moment she turned to go the way she had come. She doesn't know if she should turn to face them or keep looking for a hint of Draco and Harry, but it feels as if the enemies are on all sides of her, and if she stays still for a heartbeat, they will all find her.

The air is filled with the heaviness of magical energy, and the ground is loose from all the trampling of running feet. The adrenaline is making her dizzy, but it's overriding the pain, thrumming through her blood. Draco and Harry are probably looking for her, and she keeps waiting to see the static of Harry's hair or Draco's tall frame with his face in hard lines. She wants so badly to see them.

Her feet slip, and her arms shoot out for balance, spinning wildly as her heart jumps up into her throat. She finds it, thumb pushing up along the length of her wand as she dodges a bolt of murky orange and fires a spell back. Her breath is burning down her throat, and she's not sure if it's from how long she's been gasping without water, or from the Dark magic permeating the air she runs through. She just has to ge--

Forty-Seven

Day: 1568; Hour: 3

Coldness. A sharp impact, then a heavy weight to her gut. Hermione opens her eyes as the oxygen shoots out of her lungs, seeing a crooked mask over wide eyes staring out in front of them, before the Death Eater pushes themselves up and over her. A green light hits them in the back of the skull, and they fall before a figure darts through the smoke, stomping on her hand before disappearing.

Hermione yanks her hand to her chest with a squeak, her muscles stiff. She fists her hand, staring up at a dark sky and swirls of smoke. The screaming all around her is slow to filter in, and she's about to turn her head when someone trips over her again. There's only a dark cloak, no sign of either side, before they are rushing on.

They think she's dead.

Her breath tumbles into her lungs, and she clenches her other hand, finding the length of her wand still there. She had been running, and then...and then... She could have been dead. Would that have been it? Just...nothing at all. One moment wild with life, and the next another corpse on the ground, lost in the smoke.

Her inhale is sharper this time, and the mud is thick under her as she digs her elbow back. The fight. Draco, Harry, Ron, her friends, Sam, Toad, Lupin, all of them, out there, somewhere. And Death Eaters. Thousands of them, it feels like, and the heat of flames, the rotten stench, the tingling of magic along her skin, the metallic taste at the back of her tongue.

She rolls her head, looking to all sides of her, and then scrambles to her feet in slips, a grunt, and a hard grip to her wand.

Day: 1568; Hour: 4

"I don't get it," Toad wheezes, wiping his mouth, only to start gagging again when Sam vomits on his trainers.

Yellow and thin. Stomach bile, and Hermione feels the burning scratchiness in her chest and throat at the memory of it. Sam's hands are red and shaking, and he doesn't seem to notice how he smears it all over his face below the wrinkled lines of his brow, swiping at a wetness that feels more damaging. The tears might be for this

moment or the force of his gagging, but they all pretend it's the latter or it was never there at all.

"Fu-- Do Aurors go through any *training* anymore?" Draco sneers, jumping back from the spray.

Toad closes his eyes, breathes, and shakes his head. Shakes it like it could dislodge the memory from his head. The Auror on the ground, half his face blown away and his legs severed. But there is no getting rid of that -- not without the use of strong magic.

"I don't get how there are only three Curses that are considered Unforgivable." Toad shakes his head again, wiping his face, trying to breathe.

"Just don't look at it." Harry's tone is low and even, before he grabs the back of her shirt and yanks her toward him.

Sam grabs Harry at the same time, pulling him back, and the force causes all three of them to stumble and trip to the ground. Draco dodges the spells aimed at them, Toad's shirt ripping as Draco pulls him faster, and the five of them send out their counter-attacks at the same time.

"I have to break." Draco doesn't flinch when she swings her wand toward him, casting over his shoulder.

"My neck?" Toad coughs, rubbing where the collar had dug into his skin.

"Where?" Hermione glances at the blond, his eyes trained on the sky.

"The graves." She catches the very annoyed look on Draco's face, and follows his eye line to the hesitant understanding on Harry's. "There's a tunnel there, *Potter*. I have orders."

"We'll go with you."

"I'll go alone."

"We'll bring you there," Harry corrects, and Draco scowls.

Day: 1568; Hour: 5

Hermione hits the ground with a grunt, heat searing across her side. There's

wetness on her palm when she presses it there, rolling in the grass and to her feet to escape the jet of color that scorches the ground where she had been. She casts at the large form to her right before jerking her wand back, yanking their feet out from under them. Their spell sails into the air, but she's not quick enough to dodge the line of blue from the other Death Eater to the side of her.

She screams through her teeth, the pain moving through her shoulder, sparking at her temples, and flooding her chest. It fills her entire left arm until the muscles feel like it's impossible to move them, and she casts a blocking spell in a gasp that sounds too close to a sob. Two spells hit off her shield, shoving her feet back, and her right arm wobbles as she tries to breathe through the pain. She doesn't dare look at her shoulder, blood flowing down her skin.

Her body heaves forward as green erupts from the end of her wand, and she drops to her knees as one of the Death Eaters fall, another spell flying over her head. She feels as if half the energy she had left was wrapped around the curse she sent out, and there's an odd draining sensation traveling from her shoulders and down her spine.

The Death Eater is injured, hunched over with one arm clutching their stomach, and their wand is trembling in the air. Hermione blocks, counters, blocks, grinding her teeth together as she stumbles to her feet. Another Killing Curse might just take all that's left within her, but she doesn't have a choice - any second now there will be more Death Eaters while she is alone, and they will undo a Stunning or Binding spell, and they will kill her.

"*Avada Kedavra*!" she yells, as force hits her in her thighs, throwing her back through the air.

She slams against something unmoving with a *hugh* and crack, and she bites down so hard to keep herself from yelling out at the pain that blood fills her mouth. There's a deep pressure in her body, and a stinging sensation that covers her skin, making it hard to breathe.

There's a whine in her throat before she gasps for oxygen, raising her wand in case the blow stopped her from hitting her target. Something is moving quickly in the wisps of smoke, and she draws her feet back, setting her jaw and clenching her teeth as she uses the structure behind her to push herself up.

It takes her a second to recognize him, just until the white-grey moves away from his face. Draco finds her in a second, blood on his cheek and neck, staining the hand that holds the wand he moves away from her. For a second, she wants to sag back

down to the ground in relief, but it's there and gone before she can fully acknowledge it was there at all.

He scans to his left, and she swings her aim right--

Her inhale rattles, and hearing and sight dim down to just the sound of her heartbeat in her ears. She sags against the wall, her boots skidding forward, and she might have met the ground had Draco not grabbed her arm. He yanks her up and around, and she trips over wood before stumbling into his back. She grunts at the pain, but it doesn't hurt enough to overcome the words pounding in her mind. *My wand, my wand, mywandmywandmywand*. Her breath speeds up, faster*faster*, and hysteria edges in.

"My wand," she whispers as she sinks to her knees beside him.

Draco's hand covers her mouth, specks of dirt rolling between her face and the slide of his palm. He mutters a Disillusionment, and her nails bite into her skin. She closes her eyes for a moment, and the lids are heavier than she had noticed, heavy enough to have to force them open at the creak of wood.

Oh, God.

She stays perfectly still, evening out her breathing as the Death Eater's lighting spell sweeps the gazebo. She readies her wand, but it's useless. Snapped in half and completely *useless*. It doesn't matter if she has all the strength in the world, and knows every skill this war could require of her, and more spells than her enemy. Without a wand, she is already dead.

Her wand. *This* one. Useless, gone, broken.

She stares at the splintered tip as the Death Eater leaves and Draco moves away from her. She knows she should put it in her pocket, that it won't do anything for her, but she can't seem to loosen her fingers from around it.

She needs a wand. She'll think about it later. She just needs something that will work, even if the loss of her wand made her feel like her heart is trying to give up on itself. Yes, that's all. Missions, and plans of action, and backup routes. If it's broken, if it can't be fixed, you find another way.

The Death Eaters on the ground are gone, and if she attempts summoning a wand from one of them in the group patrolling past, there's no way to be sure it will work for her, and she might be bringing five of them down on Draco's head.

The Death Eaters seem to have a firm lock on the part of the lawn they had fought their way onto, and have formed groups; some make rounds to keep the grounds clear, and the rest work on expanding their stronghold. She had been separated from everyone in the dark and smoke, Harry disappearing with several Aurors, and Draco with Sam. When Hermione ran toward the sound of Toad's screaming, she had found Death Eaters instead. There's no telling where they are now, and she can't rely only on Draco until she finds a body on the ground and a wand that will work.

"Okay," Draco whispers, and it sounds dragged from his throat. "You have to go."

You? Not *we*? No-- He pulls her up, brings her a step toward the door, and she automatically pulls the opposite way.

She can see that dawn is breaking open the edge of the sky, filtering light up into the once-black blanket, and slowly edging out the darkness of their shapes. There is less screaming and frenzy, but the fighting is still heavy. There's a bone-tired sensation sweeping across the sprawling lawns, but the need is still thick. It seems to intensify with the first sight of morning, as if they are all desperate to prove themselves the winner to the morning face of the sun.

His nails are jagged, like he ripped them with his teeth, and they make her skin burn; she thinks there must be blood, though she cannot see behind her and in the dark that's inside, but she imagines the color of it on the paleness of his skin.

"I'm going to count to eighteen, then you're going through the door."

"I am *not* going through-"

"You're going through the door, Grang-"

"I'm not going through it! I'm not going through the bloody door!" His fingers tighten, the muscles in his chest bunch against her back, and she can feel his sweat slide down her neck. "I'll scream! I swear to God, I'll *scream*-"

"Shut up! Shut up and go!" His panic matches her, but lower and heavier in his voice, and she must grab the door frame and push her feet against it to keep herself from getting thrown past it. She bites her lips hard enough to taste blood, trying to stop the scream at the pain that roars from the pressure.

He's trying to make her *leave*. Leave, like she cares how much pain she is in, or that she doesn't have her wand. Leave, like she *can*, with him alone.

There is a loud, painful thumping, like a marching army or her wild heartbeat, but probably both. Her tongue feels numb in its bed, and her arms and legs are burning with the force it's taking to keep herself from doing what he wants. The pain is almost intolerable, and she knows she wouldn't be able to handle it at all if she didn't know what letting go would mean.

"I am not a quitter! I am not a *quitter*, Draco Malfoy! This is mine! This. Is. *Mine!*" Her voice is clogged and too many words come out on the brink of a sob, and there is a heaviness in her chest like her heart is trying to relocate itself.

Does he know what he's demanding of her? What he's asking her to do? *To let you die,*, his words after the mission for Ron, angry in her mind, and she shakes her head violently.

"I fucking swear--" he gasps and growls in her ear, as if he's talking through a hole in his throat, and when he presses against her and yanks her arms, there is a tremble in his chest that lets her know he has had enough.

"No!" It is broken, these letters, and desperate. There is a struggle, brief, and she kicks and pushes, because if she leaves him alone...*if she leaves him alone*.

"I love you," he gasps against her ear, and her inhale is sharp through her teeth.

She is thrown out the door and out onto wet grass before she can even notice that she has stopped pushing back against him. Her boots slide, and she catches herself on air before she can topple. She turns her head over her shoulder. Turns wide, glossy eyes toward him, the tears spilling onto her cheeks, but she doesn't blink. She doesn't even breathe.

"*Run*, Granger, *go*!"

She is shaking, and the outside brings the screams louder, brings to color and scent the spells, and brings reality back to fearful bones. She eyes the smoke and shadows as something she has seen so many times, though never like this -- no, *neverlikethis*.

Hermione spins, but doesn't feel the wind, and looks up at him in the doorway. At his sticky, bloody clothes, and his wild face, and his hair soaked with sweat. *I love you*. Had it been to shock her into stillness? Or is it because of this? Because he is injured just as badly as her, except he has a wand.

Because he'll be by himself in the middle of a Death Eater nest, and he doesn't

know if he'll make it out?

But he said, he said it. He loves her. He *loves. Her.* Something inside of her is shaking, wrecking the flow of her blood. There's a deep burning in her chest cavity, and it doesn't feel like winning at all. It *hurts*. It's damn well *tearing her apart.*

"Come *with* me," she whispers so low that she does not think he hears her, but it does not matter -- she knows that he has spent too long fighting against life to know how to stop.

His hair is slicked back with perspiration and his desire to fully see the world around him, and it a stark reminder of their youth. Of him, and Hogwarts, and when she had first encountered him with his hair like that. There are moments, huge lapses of time, that hang between that faded twelve year image and the one she sees so defined and hard in front of her. She feels time, heavy and cruel inside her chest, swelling up along her skin until she feels bruised by it. He was a horrible little boy, who became *this* man in front of her now. And while he stands there as a single speck among the hordes of war and loss, she sees him in sharp, bold lines against a backdrop of faint colors and other people's lives. Because while Draco Malfoy is nothing to the world, he...he is *everything* to her.

"I said, *go*. We don't have fucking time! Shit, fuck, damn it, Granger, *run*!"

A sob bubbles up, popping in her mouth. She does *not* want to leave him here, alone and injured, but he *will not* come, and what is she supposed to do? She has no wand, she'll be a liability, she can't help him, and she can't make him come with her.

"I--" She cuts herself off, shaking her head, and pushes her hand against her heart, that throbbing ache. "Me too."

His eyes are unwavering, but his expression does not change - pleading, angry, panicked, urgency. She presses harder to her chest and turns, staggering, and takes off for the woods before she risks both their lives. She runs with his image in her head, as if he is still in front of her, barely seeing the ground she rushes over. She is shaking and crying, and in no state to think, but she forces herself to anyway, because it's not time for a breakdown. It is time to figure this out and find a way to fix this.

She makes a break for a body on the ground, the glint of orange being her sole point of concentration, and she falls over herself when she reaches the fallen man. She digs in his pockets, searching for a Portkey, but can't find one.

She pries the wand from the his stiff hand, cold and the skin strange, her own shaking as she raises it. There are bodies on the ground in various states of broken, all captured in a moment they won't escape from, and she aims toward them. "*Accio* Saint Mungo's Portkey."

It is her left hand that she is forced to use, and it feels odd, but the sensation is lost under the cold wave that hits her insides at the feel of using someone else's wand. She is not sure if it will even work, but the thud against her arm tells her at least *something* has come.

She uses another spell to cut a patch off the man's shirt, but it sets the cloth on fire instead, and it takes her four tries to put it out. She's on the edge of her hysteria, of balling up and screaming herself hoarse just to release all the emotions, but she's stronger than that. She has a plan, a faulty wand, and she is brave. She is so brave, she is so strong, she is Hermione Granger.

She rips a piece of Harry's shirt off, and uses it to pull the coin out of the mud at the bottom of the puddle she is standing in. Her body is swaying back and forth, the world blurry at the edges of her sight, and her thoughts muddled. She pushes her arm against the deep wound across her ribs, curls her toes, and jerks her right shoulder. The pain flares as brightly as the fire consuming Draco's childhood home.

Too much, she thinks, gasping deeply to push the black web from her eyes, digging her fingers into the earth. She gives herself another second and lurches to her feet, running back the way she came. She tries to remember how long she has been gone, to remember the rounds they made, but it feels like hours too long that she has left Draco on his own.

She waits deep within the trees, just to the point where she can hear them. If she cannot see them, then they cannot see her, and she can't risk getting any closer than that. She doesn't hear any panic from them, or any spells cast nearby, so Draco must still be in the gazebo.

He isn't. She checks twice to make sure he is *really* not there still, and her heart thunders with fear until she is dizzy with it. On the third try, she finds three Death Eaters inside instead, and still no sight of the blond, and no place that he could have been hiding inside. It takes her three attempts to set the place on fire. The first sizzles out and the second backfires, fire roaring back as she dives away from it. It still burns her shoulder, neck, and hair, and her skin feels raging hot and stretched.

She doesn't dare touch her skin like some instinct demands of her, to cradle it and breathe through the feeling until it numbs. She jumps to her feet instead, her

sight blurry, and feels the heat from the fire consuming the trees behind her. She wobbles on her feet, burnt skin in her nostrils, hanging in the back of her throat. Her third attempt hits the Death Eaters coming after her rather than the gazebo.

The burning men set a screaming path across the lawn, distracting the patrol, and she runs faster than she thought she could. Adrenaline, fear, panic, need - these things she clutches against her, because they keep her going. Because they pull out every bit of strength she didn't know she had.

She runs toward the loudest part of the lawn. Her survival instinct is screaming at her for the choice, reminding her of the unpredictable wand, but she can't stop. If... When she finds him, he'll be there. If he is anywhere, he'll be there. She has to save him - from the Death Eaters, from the war, from himself. The wand works for her a little over half the time, and she sticks to simple spells. She doesn't dare try any of the Curses, or anything with the power to kill her if it backfires.

Her chest is aching, her body soaring in pain, but she ignores her darker thoughts. She pushes them away with the force of a hurricane, she stomps on them until they are shards at the bottom of her hope. *Please, please, please*, she begs someone, herself, something.

The manor blazes in front of her. The fire is a beast against the sky, the house crumbling to smoldering debris. By the afternoon, there won't be anything but ash and Draco's memories. And soon they will find out who will be standing to watch the wind carry it across Wiltshire and into the Canal. She can't even concentrate on this, though, on the possibility of their success or failure, because all she can think about is not being too late. Is...

She finds him, though she looks over him at first before catching the glimpse of white locks under his hood in the weak light of dawn. She might be having a heart attack with the way it stops, flutters, and then pounds in uneven bursts. Her stomach flips, spins to knots, and she might vomit or cry any moment now. He's leaning against a tree, panting heavily, all his weight on his right foot as the other hovers above the ground. He's tying the Phoenix band around his head, but it's already soaking through with blood from whatever wound he's trying to cover. His hands have stopped moving under his hood, and when she looks down at his face, she realizes it is because he has spotted her.

"What the fuck did I tell you?" he mouths, eyes hard and angry, and she takes a steadying breath before speeding up her run toward him.

"Draco-"

"What are you doing, Granger? I *told* you to get out of here!"

"I found a wand."

He opens his mouth, shaking his head, his face pulled into a disbelieving look. "Have you seen what's going on here? Or are you completely fucking blind *along with* your stupidity? You're damn well *impossible*, Granger! Get *back* to the safe house and *stay there*!"

"The safe house is gone. And don't tell me what to do, Draco Malfoy, because--"

"Well, someone has to! Someone has to, because you obviously can't think for yourself!" he yells, and then looks up, eyes scanning over her head.

He grabs her arm, yanking her behind the tree, hopping to keep from falling over. "You're hurt."

"Everyone's hurt," he barks out.

"You need to come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere. You're going to--"

"Then *I'm* not going anywhere either!"

"Yes, you are." He nods, his eyes wide, and there's a hint of madness that would scare her if she hadn't seen it before, here, on other people's faces. "You're getting--"

"No. Not unless-- You know what? You know what, Draco? You go on and on about my stupidity and my suicidal Gryffindor tendency toward self-sacrifice, but what are you doing? What the *hell are you doing*? You can't fight like this! You can't defend yourself or do anything! So you're going to suck it up, and you're going to--"

"Granger," he bites out, leaning to look around the tree before looking back at her. "Don't make me *force* you to leave. Because I will. I'll fucking drag you and Apparate you out myself, and then come back here once I've got you in a holding cell. Do you understand?"

"You're going to have to do that then, Draco, because I'm not leaving without you." She sniffs, raising her chin, and tries to dig for the Portkey discreetly.

Which is a feat, considering his close proximity. His hand is braced against the bark beside her head to keep himself upright, his body near enough to hers that she has to be careful not to touch him when she raises her hand to her pocket. He is being ridiculous about this, because it's suicide for him to continue on, and he must know this. *She* certainly does, and this is *exactly* why she's going to bring him out of here whether he likes it or not.

He's on his own, he's badly injured, and he won't see the full sunrise if he continues. There is not a single way she can live with herself if she lets him decide this moment, because she knows where it ends, and she will not go without him. She will not wake up in a bed or cell tomorrow and know he was dead because of this moment, because she failed to save him when he wouldn't save himself. And if they both were dead by tonight, then at least she knew she gave everything she had to this.

"I have orders, and--"

"Since when does Draco Malfoy listen to *orders*?"

"I have shit I have to do! And no one else is going to do them, because no one else knows to! Until I do it, I'm not going anywhere."

"And it's worth your life?" Her laugh is disbelief.

"*Mine* is not worth *yours*! Fuck! *Fuck!* I don't have time for this shit! Cross into the woods here, and keep walking North until you're past the barrier. I'll send someone for you."

"I'm-"

"I'll fucking drag you. I'll drag you by your frizzy little head, Hermione, and I *mean* it," he says in hisses and growls, and there's rage shaking under his voice.

"Draco?" she asks as he ducks his head around the tree again.

"*What*?"

"I'm sorry." His eyes don't even have the time to meet hers, but she can see the confusion begin to take over his expression before she speaks again. "*Stupefy*!"

He falls limp against her, his slick neck sliding against her cheek as she yanks the Portkey from her pocket and his wand from his hand, shoving the coin into his palm.

She forces his fingers shut, squeezing for all her worth, and he's back to movement far earlier than he would have been had she had her own wand.

He pulls his head away from the tree, his face now in front of hers, and he is positively *livid*. She has not seen such rage in him for a very, very long time, and it sends fear to a passage of her throat to choke her. He tries to yank his hand from hers, and opens his fingers, but she is quick to follow his hand, her grip loosening but not falling away. She presses her palm to the Portkey before it rolls off his palm, keeping it trapped between their hands, while he smacks hard into her good shoulder and shoves the breath out of her lungs when she hits the tree.

Then they are gone, the world spinning and darkening, lighting up brightly just seconds later. Hermione has just enough time to suck in a new breath of air before it is gone again, hitting the floor on her back with Draco on top of her, the tree no longer there to support them.

He yanks his hand from her grip, the coin tinkering against the floor.

She raises her arm above her head when she realizes he is going for the hand with their two wands, and she cries out at the movement of her wrist, and *screams* when he grabs it. She wiggles and bucks against him, trying to get out, but he is hard, heavy, and completely unmoving.

"No!" she cries, smacking him in the face, shoving his forehead to push him away. He grabs it, grunting, and whacks it against the floor.

He grips her other arm again, stopping her from moving it away from him in a painful dance above their heads, and yanks it toward him as she screams again. He releases her wrist at her scream, but pulls his wand from her so hard and quick that it burns her palm. Voices yell out from somewhere around them, but she is too busy dealing with her pain and him to pay attention. She bites hard into her lip, the tears streaming down her cheeks as she forces herself to make her wrist work despite the pain, and shoves the tip of the wand into his chest. He broke the Stunning spell too easily before to consider it any sort of threat, not bothering to aim back at her.

"You are going to regret that."

"No, I'm *not*. And don't even think about Apparating out of here, Malfoy, because I'll be going right with you." She yanks on his shirt, clenched tightly in the fist of her hand. "We can play this game all night, if you want."

"*Stupefy!*"

Hermione squeezes her eyes shut, and it takes her several seconds to realize that it didn't sound like Draco's voice. She gives an experimental twitch of her fingers and opens her eyes, Draco's weight completely rested on her. She blinks at his ear, at his hair against her face, and then over him to the man in a white robe. The man -- the *Healer*, she tells herself -- levitates Draco out of the room and into another. She is levitated next, a woman looking worriedly at her as she guides her to a bed, ignoring Hermione's protests that she just needs a quick remedy before going back, because Harry, and Ron, and...

She turns her head once she's lying down, watching the Healer take Draco's wand from his frozen grip, before falling into unconsciousness.

Day: 1569; Hour: 12

She wakes up to a pain potion sloshing against her lips, raising bleary eyes to the woman in front of her and opening her mouth. She swallows hungrily, willing the ache to recede, and her eyes close despite her efforts.

Day: 1569; Hour: 19

No one is there when she opens her eyes. The room is lit with a faint glow, and she turns her head, finding herself in a private room. Her body is stiff and sore, and fear washes over her as her mind clouds with a hundred thoughts. Her throat is dry, a sourness at the back of her tongue from the potions. She mostly tastes and smells sterility, strong and unwelcome.

Her muscles don't want to work when she pushes herself up, and she has to hold her breath and push her lips together to hold back sound. She pauses once she's sitting up, breathing deeply through her nose, and looks over at the side table. There's no sign of the wand she had found, and just her own, hanging limply from a quarter way down the length.

She's careful with her legs and the pull on her back for two attempts, and then clenches her teeth and shoves past their insistence on not moving. There's a grunt, low in her throat, and she wobbles, but she's on her feet. Her toes are dark blue and purple, swollen, and it hurts to straighten her back in the walk to the window. She stands sideways against the wall, reaching out to move the curtain slowly, and sees nothing but darkness and half a moon.

It's night, then. A day has passed, and she's here and not dead or somewhere far worse. Either they have won the battle at the manor, or the Death Eaters have yet to seize the hospital. She likes to think it's the first, because if the other side won, the

hospital would be where they lined up their injured and finished the enemies. They certainly wouldn't have stayed at the manor while the Light received full medical treatment. Right now there would be Healers under orders and the aim of wands.

Hermione looks over at the doorway, lightly touching her ribs.

She needs facts, right now. She needs names and answers. In her head, it's Draco frozen on a bed, Harry disappearing into the smoke, Ron... She shakes her head, wincing at the sharp pain in her neck. She can't stop the image from coming back, though. The jet of green, the way his hair flew up, how his body hit the ground and skidded through the grass with the force. It wasn't Ron - Draco promised, Harry said. It didn't stop how disturbing it was to watch her best friend die, even if it wasn't really him. Her heart had exploded like it was, and there had been a distant knowledge in her head. *This is it. This is where I finally lose it. This is where I don't come back.*

It was never him, Harry had said, and all that bitterness and anger. She didn't have time to process it then, in the middle of a battle, in their fight for survival and victory. But he could have only meant that one way. Hermione closes her eyes, pressing her hand over her eyes. Because everything makes more sense in hindsight. Because everything is crystal clear. When you're living it, it seems impossible, but looking back, you always wonder *how* you could have *possibly* missed it.

She had thought he was strange because of his captivity. The awkward way he acted, staying in his room, his paranoia, his distaste for getting too close. God, the *anxiety potion* he kept in stock. She remembers the stiff hugs, the clumsy way he moved, the-- Oh, God, the *traitor*, the imprisonment, her memories erased. She must have found him out. He might have even been the one to leave her back in ribbons. He... It was never him. The moment with Molly, the hugs, the laughing, chess, and... *all of it*. All of it, and it wasn't even *Ron*.

She rubs harder at her eyes, at the wetness, and evens her breathing. She feels *betrayed*, which is so stupid because it was a Death Eater, and there was no trust, or loyalty, or love to betray at all. It wasn't Ron at all. It was *never* him, and they were so *stupid*. Every moment scattered in her memories gathers together, forming one raging lie and a glaring truth.

Anger then, swift and unyielding, at him, at the Death Eater who wore Ron's skin and turned their joy into something ugly. Anger at herself for not realizing it, for not somehow *knowing, right away,* that it wasn't Ron at all. For--

Noise erupts into her room, and Hermione jerks her head toward the door. She scans the room, contemplating and dismissing: the chair, bed, window, blanket, pillow. She moves toward the empty potion bottles in the rubbish, glancing at the counter she would break them open on, and then the cabinets that might have something sharper, easier, that allows distance. There is yelling, questions, beeps, and rushed words behind the Healer that walks in. Hermione stares, eyes wide, as a man goes running past her door, two Healers chasing or following after. The door swings shut to silence again, except the gentle tapping of the Healer's shoes, and her clipboard rubbing against her robes.

Hermione stops moving across the room, barely acknowledging the curiosity on the Healer's face. "I need names."

The woman blinks at her, glances back down at the clipboard, and her stretched smile disappears. "Believe me, you're not the only one. There is no list. We haven't finished identifying people."

"But if you've started, you must have some. And what about Ron Weasley?"

"I don't know that name."

"Draco Malfoy."

"Mal-- I don't know that name either."

"He came in with me!" Hermione spreads her hands, like the answer must be obvious.

"I assure you, Miss Granger, a lot of people came in with you." The Healer looks fairly ragged now, exhaustion and annoyance pulling at her face.

"Fine. Harry Potter." Hermione gives her a look that very much dares her to tell her she doesn't know that one.

"I can't release patient--"

"I'm practically his--"

"--but if you put him on your list, I'll let him come in before he breaks another vase." Hermione gapes at the woman for a second, and the Healer tries to hide a smile behind her chart. "You can have three visitors. We have to limit the amount of people--"

"Harry, Draco Malfoy...Ron Weasley." *Is he here? Did they find him? How did they know? Did--* "Lupin, as well, in case you need my permission for that. I'm sure he's already here." *As long as...*

"Alright. I need you to relax so I can check you over. How are you feeling?"

Horrible, angry, confused, afraid, worried. "Fine."

Day: 1569; Hour: 20

Harry settles himself into the chair next to her bed, clad in hospital pajamas and his arm in a sling. There are a few bruises, and he holds his ribs when he sits, but he looks fine. Perfectly fine, perfectly alive, brushing off her worried questioning of his health to replace it with his own.

"I'm fine. Had some broken bones, burns, a couple wounds. I've had worse." Her fingers pick quickly at the little balls of thread on her blanket, trying to ease her impatience.

"I know. It doesn't..." He picks up the two halves of her wand from the bedside table, holding them up to her with a questioning look.

"When we got separated. Right before I got the Killing Curse out, he cast something at me. It threw me into the side of the gazebo. Broke my wand." And her other wrist too, unless it was from something else. The images have combined, lapping over one another, and it takes a lot of thinking to know what happened when and what happened at all.

"What did you do?"

Her mouth opens, words straining, remembering Draco filling up the doorway. *I love you*, like he was in pain to say it. Like it kicked him in the gut. She almost can't believe he said it, but there's nothing else that sounds enough like it that he might have said. There's nothing else that could cause that reaction in her body before her mind had even grasped it. She almost thought she had made it up. Had gone crazy with the war and imagined the things she wanted to hear, that she thought she never would, that she told herself was impossible so she could be prepared for when it was.

He loves her. Impossibly. Somehow...somehow he does.

He was going to kill her, she is sure of it. "I found another one. Harry, I need the

list."

"There isn't one. I know… I know of Tonks. I found her."

Coldness, in her gut. She raises her hand to her eyes, rubbing at the wetness again, the bandages on her broken fingers scraping her cheek. Letters tumble up from her vocal chords, but they don't make sense. Tonks. God, she had really been hoping…she really hoped. Hoped so hard that hope could make a difference at all.

Harry takes a breath, his hand finding hers as she pushes her head back into the pillows, closing her eyes. The tears escape anyway, hot on her face, and a knot convulses in her throat.

"I don't know about anyone else. I know Ginny is fine. Molly, Arthur, George, Bill, Charlie. Lupin. Malfoy."

It's the first time she's ever gotten a list of who is alive instead of who is dead. Her body sags, wetness creeping out from her lashes, but there's one more name that could break her. "Ron?"

Harry's fingers squeeze harder, and her heart drops, her eyes opening to face it. "Ron… The person we found in Italy wasn't Ron. In fact, he made it quite clear that the only reason all of us weren't dead was because they decided not to kill us. They needed us to bring…fake Ron into the Order."

"It was all a lie."

"I know. But we have the real Ron. Malfoy and Lupin were on a mission, before the Death Eaters stormed Headquarters, and found him. I guess Malfoy remembered you saying something about him being at the Burrow, and it was…obvious he had been a prisoner for some time. They brought him to the Ministry, went into his head--"

"Wait, Harry… When we were questioned after the miss--"

"He must have been an Occlumens. It was probably part of the reason they chose him to do it. He might have been a Legilimens as well. Goes into my head, or Ron's, recreates the memories in his own. They must have beaten him up a bit when we were captured, because he had bruises. Or one of us did, in his real form or something." Harry rubs his palm into his forehead, over his scar, over the memory of people being in his mind. "We were idiots. We were so bloody happy that we found him, we buggered ourselves."

He's dead. He's dead, or she would find him, and she would… She doesn't know what she would do, but they are things she would regret later, if only because she had become the sort of person who could do them, and know the sort of anger that could make the decision for her.

"That's how they found out about the safe houses as well. The…" Hermione shakes her head. "How is Ron? Our Ron?"

He had been imprisoned that entire time. When she and Harry had been sitting idly by, trying to help a man, a Death Eater, an enemy that wasn't him. Some man they had protected, and laughed with, and grew more angry with Death Eaters when he would pull away from her touch. *Mudblood*, he had been thinking, and trying to keep up appearances, while their Ron was being tortured, or starved, or left alone in the dark.

Harry swallows, his eyes scanning the far wall. "He's…not all there, Hermione. His body will heal, but his mind…eventually. He doesn't really speak, and when he does, it doesn't make sense. He's off in his own world. He didn't even really recognize me. He just stared and started muttering about rocks. He doesn't like any light, it freaks him out. Sometimes he gets violent."

"So, he's… Are you saying…" Because she can't. She can't even ask.

"The Healers said it might not be permanent. The amount of torture, and the fact that he was kept in a cell for so long…" Harry looks at once like he might cry, scream, and break something. "He's in a different place, mentally. Something he created to survive. We have to slowly draw him out, show him he's safe, prove that we're real. They have methods we can use, and… It will work. It has to. We just have to try hard, and he'll be fine."

Hermione nods at the conviction in Harry's voice, but she feels like crying too. Like giving into the tears already on her cheeks and losing it. "I'll research--" She cuts off at the small grin that claims his mouth. "I'm sure if we develop the proper methods, trial run them, and find the most effective, we'll get him back to normal. It's just… It might take awhile. We have to remember to be patient, and--"

"It's going to take awhile for everyone. We have Ron - I made them triple check - and we're all alive. That's…"

"Enough."

"For now." Harry nods.

They sit in silence, too busy with their own thoughts and emotions to keep speaking.

Forty-Eight

Day: 1570; Hour: 7

She tried to sneak to find his room twice, and she was easily caught by the patrolling guards and busy Healers. They make her wait until morning and she hardly sleeps. She can't help thinking of that moment at the gazebo. His voice, over and over in her head. Her confession, that ache. She also knows he's going to be angry, but he might forgive her.

She glances at his chart and sees her name, then Lupin, written under the Visitor section. He either isn't angry enough to keep her away, or he's angry enough to get revenge as soon as possible. She walks down the hall to the ninth door, takes a deep breath, and pushes it open. She immediately finds his eyes over a tray of hospital-issued breakfast. *Ba-dump, ba-dump,* her heart matches the quickening pace of blinking light that signals his heartbeat.

She can't fully inspect him, the pajamas covering everything except his hands and from the neck up. His head is wrapped, and she remembers him doing the same thing with his Phoenix band when she found him. The room reeks of potions, a dark bruise on his neck right below the mark she left with her mouth beneath his ear. There are several scratches over his jaw as if he fell, and a square of gauze peeks out from beneath the collar of the gown. His hands are bruised and scratched, but his fingers are curling into fists just fine. And his eyes are open. Open, on her, alert, alive.

She feels the swelling of a lot of things at her gut, but there's pride there too. Just a little bit. Because she saved him this time, and no matter how he feels about it, it was worth it for the push and pull of his breaths across the room.

She clasps her hands behind her back, grinding a heel against the floor. She wants to move closer, but her heart kept building with each step, and one more might collapse it into her ribs. She takes a moment to sink into the sight of him, and she thinks he's taking it too because he just keeps staring. He hadn't thought he would have the chance again. She knew that the second her feet landed on grass with her heart somewhere behind her. He didn't think he'd have to face this moment, and she knows the first thing he's going to grab is his anger, because it's easier and he knows what to do with it. They both do.

"When I get out of this bed, I'm going to kill you," he whispers, voice cracking.

"If my wand isn't fixed, you *might* have a chance."

She would be more cautious of his anger, but there's an empty potion bottle next to the tray, and he's always calmer whenever he gives in to taking one. She's glad to see it. She'll take the luck of timing with relief when she can get it, and she knows all the emotions in the room are enough for an explosion if he was on fire with her and not foggy on medication.

"You should start running now, before they put me in Azkaban for it."

"I can always outrun you later."

"You run like you're wading through mud." He inhales, something cracking in his chest. "I am going to make you regret that stunt you pulled."

"I'm not going to regret it, no matter what you do. I'm glad I got you out of there. I would do it all over again."

"You know, when someone is angry at another person, it is usually best for the wrong-doer to condole with the angry person -- not piss them off more."

"Well, I've always lived by a different set of rules."

He snorts, or laughs, she can't tell. "You're an impossible woman, do you know that?"

"Yes."

He focuses back onto her again, his voice edging out. "You had no right to pull that shit on me. I should curse you for your audacity. I don't know where you got the idea in your head that you can include me in your personal missions of playing the heroine, Granger, but I'm not Potter or Weasley. I won't lie here and thank you for fucking me over."

She narrows her eyes at him, leaning forward and pressing a hand to her stomach. "I didn't screw you over, Malfoy. You were too busy doing that to yourself to notice, I guess! I don't know when you jumped on the suicide wagon, but *I* wasn't going to watch you kill yourself, so get over it."

"I'm not *you*, Granger -- I don't risk my life for stupid things. There was a device down in the tunnels that Lupin needed to activate to--"

"And to risk your life for that isn't stupid? Th--"

"This is war! All of us risk our lives everyday for it. If I hadn't expected that a long time ago, I wouldn't even be here."

"You didn't have a chance! Your leg--"

"That wasn't your decision to make!"

"Well, I made it anyway! I don't regret it, because you're *here* instead of in the morgue where you would have been! If you want to hate me for that, then do it!"

He glares at her, his jaw working rapidly, and she huffs, glaring back. She will not back down on this, though she knows she probably should. He isn't in the position to be fighting with her, and frankly, she's surprised there aren't any members of the staff bursting in to see what the problem is. It's rude and inconsiderate of her to be here now arguing with him, when he's injured, buzzing on pain potions, and should be sleeping. There has just always been something about him that gets her riled up to the point where she loses her head.

"I'm sorry." She decides to be the bigger person, and when his head lowers like he couldn't have heard her right, she clarifies. "For bursting in here to yell at you. I'll wait until you're better."

Because she's not *that much* of the bigger person to let him think she's sorry for taking him out of the mission. She'll never be sorry for that, no matter how angry he gets or how injured he is. It had been impossible for her to leave him there…just as impossible as it was to him to see her stay.

"How kind of you," he snaps, and then taps his fingers against his thigh.

"You weren't listening to reason…" She glares when she realizes that his tapping fingers were counting out seconds until she spoke again. He shakes his head at the four digits and sends her a malevolent look. "What you were asking was impossible."

"It was *simple*. Go into the woods, find a transporter, and get out. Unless you--"

"Leaving you, I mean," she rushes out, hot in the face and staring hard at her toes. "Like that. There."

Silence, and she might be imagining it, but the blinks of his heart may have increased in speed. Or maybe it's just the way embarrassment slows your brain

down until the seconds go by slow but everything seems to be happening quickly. That moment plays again in the back of her mind, and her stomach is a rolling mess of nerves. Her blood must be rushing too quickly, because there's a heat burrowing up from inside of her and spreading out, making her skin itchy. She clears her throat and looks up, meeting his stare. She's already out there - she can't get *further* out there. There just isn't any reason to pretend anymore. She doesn't have it in her.

He's studying her, and she's pretty sure she's giving everything away, though he remains expressionless. The movement of his mouth is barely perceptible, but it's like he's forming his lips around the things he wants to say, but not deciding if he should. He closes his mouth when she starts staring, pressing his lips into a thin line. A sound of aggravation rises from his throat, and he gives her an exasperated look.

"You are the most stubborn, annoying, overbearing--"

"*I'm* overbearing?" She pokes her finger into her chest, raising an eyebrow at him. "And if you want to talk stu--"

"And let's not forget-"

"Yeah, yeah, Malfoy. I hate you, too." Several things flicker across his face, too fast for her to recognize. "You should get some rest," she says quickly.

"Are you sure you're not going to go off on one of your rampages again and keep me from getting my healing sleep?" Sometimes he likes to exploit her guilt, but she doesn't blame him, because she does the same to him at times. "You should go back to your room, Granger. You look terrible."

They glare at each other but it's ruined by his bleary eyes and dropping eyelids. "From the model of perfection himself."

"Glad you noticed."

She shakes her head, smoothing her palms down the top of her legs. "Well, I'm happy you're okay."

"I hope you look just as pleased with yourself when I..." His eyebrows furrow and he shuts his eyes, pressing his fingers to his forehead.

"Draco?" She steps forward, unable to help the worry in her voice.

"I'm fine." If he weren't slowly rocking from side to side, she's sure his words would have come out more snappy than breathy.

He jumps when her fingers wrap carefully around his hand, pulling it from his face. His eyes barely open to glare at her as he frowns, giving a weak tug away. "Go to sleep."

He puts up a fight, but his breathing evens out and his chin drops to his chest in seconds.

She stands and watches him for a while, taking calm in his own calmness, in the strong and steady heartbeats from the light. She pushes the overbed table away, but doesn't trust herself to pull him into a lying position in case of injuries. She takes a seat at the edge of the bed and brushes her fingers over his bruised knuckles. It scares her, how much she cares for him. She'll never forget the ache in her chest when she stared up at him in the doorway to the gazebo, or how it felt like her insides were on fire in the exact opposite way that she is used to from him. Her heart and stomach were threatening revolt, her body shaking, and all she could think about was how she couldn't accept not seeing him again. One of the hardest thing she has ever done, she thinks, was done the moment she turned and ran away from him.

But she wasn't going to let him go that easily. And she might have definitely crossed the point where she could let him go at all. There's no escaping Draco Malfoy. She's always going to carry him around with her. Sometimes on her back like a burden, sometimes in her fingers like glass, but always clamped down to her inner functions that pump, throb, race life through her until there's no more left of it.

She bites her lip and hunches her shoulders like it could make her more careful, fluffing the pillows behind him, and eases him back. He stays asleep, not even uttering the little growl of displeasure she usually gets when moving one of his limbs or head when he's sleeping. She stares at the heaviness of his sleep in thought, a memory swimming through her mind. It feels a little like cheating, but she thinks that's alright, leaning toward him. Her breath puffs against his ear, and then she whispers the words she wished she would have said fully.

The light attached to the beats of his heart quickens immediately, flashing color across their skin as she smiles stupidly at his earlobe.

Day: 1570; Hour: 12

"You're sure you're okay, dear?" Molly brings her homemade soup, but it doesn't taste the same.

"I'm fine."

"I saw you jump out of that house." George chews his licorice, looking torn over what to say next. "It was pretty spectacular, in hindsight. You were gone before we got there."

"I…saw some people who needed help when I was in there. So I went to go find them."

"We didn't s-- We figured."

"We missed you." She tries to hold his eyes but he looks away, over her head and at the door, trapped.

"I have a girlfriend, you know." He looks at her then, a spark across his eyes, and she breathes. He'll be alright, she knows. All things must heal eventually. They have to.

"Poor thing, her," she quips, and smiles at the ghost of Weasley Revenge that passes over his face.

Day: 1570; Hour: 15

Ron doesn't look at her so much as he looks *through* her. He shakes his head, slowly, and looks down at his feet. "Hey, Ron."

He reaches up to scratch at the scar on his face. His voice is low, all rust and gravel. "The room has changed, Hermione."

She feels her eyes widen, flashing them toward the Healer who spins his hand in the air. *Go with it, follow along*, he had said. She had asked him how that is possibly going to help, and he told her it is only until Ron can adjust to seeing them. Small changes, slow, like approaching a wild animal. Like blowing bubbles and catching them against your skin.

"I know. But that's okay."

Ron's eyes are blue fire when he looks up at her, and words come out so harsh and quick she's not sure if it's even English. He turns his back to her, walking

toward the wall. "Have they got to you?"

"Wha-- No."

"How do I know?"

"Because I love you." It comes out a little too thickly, but she has to push it up through that tightening in her throat.

His fingers curl against the wall and his shoulders hunch. "Tell me you found it."

She can't seem to get enough air. She can't seem to move. "N-not yet."

Perfect stillness, and then a break. He kicks the wall, pounds his fist against it, and launches himself at the bedside table. He picks it up and throws it, but he's too weak and it's too heavy, crashing to the floor just a space in front of his feet.

"You had the books! I told you where to find them! The ring should have led you there!" He pulls at his hair, his eyes sparkling as he raises them to hers. "Why haven't you come? Why haven't you found me?"

Her blood pounds, and there's something huge and sharp in her chest cavity. "I'm right here."

He laughs, cold and ruined, on a sob. He swoops down, his hands grabbing for things on the ground, and he throws air at her. Throws so hard his tendons are popping up on his neck, and his body jerks with the thrusts of his arms. "Right through!"

"I'm still here," she pleads, leaning forward, her hands clasped, and she doesn't know if she's praying or begging. "I'm right--"

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone! *Leavemealoneleavemeleaveleaveme*!"

Hermione and Harry are halfway down the corridor as the Healer slams the door when she bursts into tears. Harry grabs her elbow, pulling her up short, and stares at the wall behind her. His jaw is clenching, his eyes tight, but his pulse his hammering against her tear-stained cheek and he hugs her too hard.

Day: 1570; Hour: 22

There's a low groan behind her from the door opening, and Hermione reaches up

to wipe at her face. She brings her sight forward from the view outside of the window, focusing on the room's reflection instead, spotting red hair. Ginny closes the door quickly and silently behind her, peeking out to make sure no one spotted her. They aren't supposed to be roaming around the hospital in the middle of the night.

Hermione swallows thickly, but her shuddering breath gives her away as quickly as the redness of her eyes. She feels overloaded with emotions. She can hardly gain control over herself, and there's nothing to distract her. No books, or television, or games. All the people she's seen are stuck in the same place as her, and there's no escape. That chasm is like a physical wound here, spreading across their skin.

She can barely make out Ginny's eyes in the weak reflection, but she can see that she's shaking her head. "You don't have to be strong for me, Hermione."

That ball rising back up, and she has to swallow three times before she can speak. "I'm fine."

"No one is fine." Ginny shrugs, like the whole world knows it and it doesn't matter. She grabs one of the visitor chairs from the wall, stiff and plastic, and sets it down next to Hermione.

"Where did you get the slippers?"

"The Healer likes me. The red hair, I think. Managed to get a pair when I mentioned my feet were cold."

Hermione huffs a laugh. "I have a female Healer, so--"

"So do I. Throw her a wink, you never know."

"I'd rather not get friendly with anyone who has to see me naked to check my injuries - male or female."

"Does Malfoy know this yet?"

Hermione gives her a look, but the redhead smirks and ignores it. "I told him I love him."

Hermione blinks out the window, having not been aware she was going to confess until she did. The moon stares back at her, reminding her of why. Of Draco's face in a hue of blue, and an impossible moment. She doesn't know why she felt the need to

tell someone else. Ginny wouldn't understand anyway - she doesn't really understand it either.

"Do you?" Ginny doesn't look very surprised, and she can't help but wonder if she gave herself away far more than she thought she had.

"Yes," Hermione whispers, looking up toward the moon, and then meeting Ginny's eyes in the window. "I tried to tell myself differently. He's... He's not an easy person to feel that way about. In this situation... But sometimes it's really easy. Sometimes it's so easy it doesn't make sense. I tried to tell myself it was a chemical imbalance."

"Did it work?"

"No. I'm only slightly better at lying to myself as I am to my friends. Mostly because I want so badly to believe it."

Ginny laughs, soft and with a shake of her head. "What did he say?"

Hermione folds her hands, flicking the nail of her thumb against the knuckle of the other. "I sort of said it back. In a way. I mean, he definitely said it first, it's just that I didn't say it all the way. He threw me out the door of a gazebo and was yelling at me to run, and he said it, said it before he pushed me out, and then I said I did too. Me too." She waves her hand in the air and shakes her head. "He just...stared. He didn't even look surprised, and I'm wondering if he already knew. Especially since I let him into my head a--"

"He's a Le--"

"Yeah. He wasn't running for the door at the time, so I thought he didn't catch on. I also... I also, sort of, told him before that. In a way. But it was...covered...sort of...with...something else."

Ginny blinks at the window, her lips curling, before she finally breaks into laughter. "What?"

"I told him I wasn't a war whore." Ginny laughs harder, and Hermione gives the other woman her best annoyed look. "After the mission for...in Italy, he was angry. Started...acting like I was just a...well, you know, a casual whatever. He wouldn't even look at me, really. So I told him I wasn't a war whore, and there was this awkward conversation, and he asked me what it meant if he was one. Then... Oh, stop *laughing* already!"

"Merlin, you two are dysfunctional."

Hermione glares at her, sniffing her nose into the air. "I meant that I had feelings for him. Then, before he pushed me out of the gazebo, he-- Ginny."

"I'm sorry. I'm just glad I fell in love with someone who never confessed his feelings for me by telling me he wasn't a whore."

Hermione's lips twitch, and she shoves Ginny in the shoulder when the laughter bubbles up. "He asked me what it meant if he *was*, and then told me he wasn't, but it was more in the literal-- And I never said we weren't...unconventional."

"You're beyond unconventional." Ginny's smile is slow to fade, and they both turn their attention to the window. "It's scary, isn't it?"

"And stupid, and annoying, and...a lot of other things. But there's no help for it. It's like I'm powerless, and... It hurts. I don't think it's supposed to hurt."

"It does anyway," Ginny whispers, shrugs. "Sometimes it hurts so badly you want to rip it out of you, but you don't, because it's worth it. When it stops being worth the hurt, it stops being worth it completely."

"I just want something easy in my life."

"You fell in love with Draco Malfoy, Hermione. You obviously don't settle for easy."

Hermione plucks at the tape around her fingers, the threads and fuzz from the blanket that had stuck to the peeled back edge. "He told me he loved me." She knows she already said this, but she needs to repeat it to both of them. Because Draco Malfoy fell in love with her too.

She doesn't know what to do with it, the words that keep repeating and the way it makes her feel. She doesn't know where to put it, so she just keeps latching onto it. And the fact that she doesn't have to say goodbye. That it's okay for her to feel what she is feeling, because even if no one else accepts or understands it, he does, in all it's complications and intricacies, and the ways that no one else could. That maybe there is a space for them after all, and it is one they have carved with the world on their backs and desperate hands.

Ginny looks over at her, and her gaze feels heavy on Hermione's cheek. "He's not *that* much of an idiot to not. Of course he does."

Hermione blushes, shakes her head. She says it like it's simple, like it didn't just shake up her world. Maybe Hermione had been standing too close to not eclipse her vision with each movement that he made. Maybe if she was standing back, if she could have allowed herself distance, she would have seen it to know before he even said it. Sometimes she thought he might, that it could go beyond some sort of caring and attachment, but it was in those times where she admitted to herself that her feelings did. And she thought it was hope again. That it was a need for it to be there that put the pieces in the order that could form it - love. *Love*. And maybe it is simple, but it also feels like the craziest thing of all. In a great way. In a way that fire can light and burn without destroying. This impossible, beautiful thing.

The wind blows leaves against the window, making the inside of the room disappear under the sights of the outside world. Hermione pulls her blanket closer around her, Ginny's knee pressing against hers, and they are lost to their thoughts again.

Day: 1571; Hour: 7

She's nervous. She had been far less nervous the first time she walked into this room because she had been more concerned with just *looking* at him. To see him and know he was okay. Now she can't help but be anxious and a little scared. A lot scared, in a different way than she's used to. In the way that he makes her feel, because these things are new to the parts of the world they acknowledge and don't ignore. She's been feeling this for months, has *known* for months. Known in the way that she sometimes said it in her head, and then told herself it was a lie five minutes later, just so she could *handle* it.

But now *he* knows. She had been standing there, lost and afraid, and the words had torn themselves from her chest. She had to say them in some way, *just in case*, because she needed him to know no matter what it might mean later. Just like he had wanted her to know.

It's not just about the war, it's not about comfort, it's not about holding onto each other because it's someone that's there. It's about holding on to it, fighting for it, because it's *her*, because it's *him*, and this has come to *mean* something. They were both exposed under the hopelessness of the situation. Had unwillingly thrown off that careful construction of indifference and hung off the edge. She still isn't sure if they are going to fall, but there's no running from it anymore.

She enters the room to find him sitting at the edge of the bed, tying his boots. He lifts his head to look at her, blowing up air to get the fringe out of his vision. She's getting released in an hour, and she wanted to see him before she left, before he

could disappear somewhere still angry. The fact that he appears to be leaving means he's definitely not under the influence of any potions, and he's less likely to be calm and disorientated.

"I thought you weren't supposed to leave until tomorrow?"

"Yes, well -- since when did I follow orders, right?" He says this a bit bitterly, and she wonders if it has to do with her.

"I guess."

He sits up, pushing his hair back from his face. "You cut your hair."

"Yeah. It was...burnt, from that night. So I got it cut." She reaches up to touch the shoulder length distractedly. "You look better."

"I would think so."

"Why didn't they put some healing balm on those scratches?" She gestures to her face, in the area she can see faint red under the few days worth of a beard.

"Probably because it didn't seem important in the grand scheme of things. I believe I got them when my face hit a tree," he answers hotly.

"Still angry then, are you?"

"You had no right to do that and you know it."

"I had every right."

"No, you didn't. I am my own human being who can't be controlled, Granger. It was my life, my decision, and--"

"It was--"

"Shut. Your fucking mouth. For once in your life, Granger. You betrayed my trust--"

"*What*? I did not betray your trust, Malfoy! I--"

"You took advantage of the moment-- No, shut up. You took advantage of the moment that I was busy making sure we were safe to spell me. And then you made

me do something I was obviously unwilling to do, when I trusted you not to. That's a betrayal of my trust."

"It is no such thing! I did what was right by you, because you were too much of an idiot to see what you should do yourself!" she cried, jabbing her finger into the air at him, because it isn't *like that*.

He smirks suddenly, his emotions switching rapidly enough to wonder if perhaps he *does* have some head damage. "Your loyal little Gryffindor heart really gets worked up over those words."

"They're dramatic." But not fully lies, and part of her is bothered with that too.

He shrugs. "Maybe. But I was pissed enough that night to want to wrap my hand around your throat."

"But you didn't."

"No. I didn't." He looks at her thoughtfully. "If someone didn't cover for what I had to do that night, I would still be furious with you for making me do something I didn't want to."

"Well, I didn't want to leave either, at the gazebo. And I'm pretty sure it was you who literally threw me out the door." Her heart pounds, words in her eardrums.

"Yes." And she knows with how easily he answered that he had already considered this. If it hadn't worked to calm him, it at least made him realize he didn't have as much right to his anger over what she had done when he did the same.

She wants to ask him who the hypocrite is now but restrains herself. Barely. "So you're not angry any longer?"

He sighs, standing, and grabs his wand off the table. "It doesn't matter if I'm still angry, because I can't kill you. And no matter what I say or do, you'll always come back anyway."

"Maybe." He looks up at her, and she takes a deep breath. "Even, then?"

He looks at her hand, then down at his holster as he tucks his wand into it. She waits for him to shake it, and when he doesn't, she glares at him, dropping it to her side. "You know, that's twice now that I've offered you my hand, and twice now that

you've denied it. It's very rude, when I'm putting myself out there, to just leave me hanging."

He raises an eyebrow at her and reaches forward, grabbing her hand and tugging her toward him. Her hand automatically wraps around his, and she stumbles into him with held breath. He kisses her slowly, his mouth warm and soft, and just a hint of his anger in the force of his tongue. She sinks into him, forgetting to act collected at all, and fists his shirt at the shoulder.

His arm wraps around her, his fingers clenching her hip. Because they are alive, because he needs her too, because he can't stop this really big and stupid thing either. Because she wouldn't let him. Because she loves him.

It's so normal and familiar. It's like they never said anything at all, and she doesn't know if it's because they are ignoring it or just accepting it. If it's because they have been feeling these things anyway, so it doesn't change anything for the other person to know. And then she wonders if it's weird for her to expect it to be different in some way. It's still exactly them.

It just feels a little stronger. A little less like she might shatter it if she isn't so very careful with it in her palm. Because if she's holding on, she knows he's holding on too, and she doesn't have to be so scared of it dropping to their feet.

A puff of air, a tug on her lip, and then he releases her. "My apologies."

She glares at him to cover up her heavy breathing. "Can you just say, 'I'm sorry'? Is that even possible for you?"

"No, afraid not. You see, I have this illness where I can't speak the S word or bolts of lightening will come out of the ceiling and fry my brain. Do you really want that to happen?"

"Bolts of lightening?" She hopes she doesn't look as amused as she feels.

"Yes. I was diagnosed at a very young age." He leans down toward her, and this is when she remembers her 'blood pressure illness'. "Very traumatic."

"I bet." She shoves him in the shoulder and he breathes a laugh. "Prat."

"Wench."

"Why do we always say the same exact things?" she asks as they walk from the

room, and she tries to ignore his slight limp. It will probably be gone in a few days, and is likely the reason he's supposed to stay until tomorrow. She wonders why they didn't give him a cane, but then she remembers his father and she understands.

She breathes in deep, arm brushing his, and her heart thrumming in her throat. This feels like an old friend one hasn't seen in a long time - there are changes to take in, but it's familiar and something you want to cling to, and she's trying to act normal in a moment that feels too big for not much at all.

"Because you lack originality, and so I force myself to use the same things as well as a way to make fun of you even more."

"Do you believe that?"

"Absolutely."

"I think you have a problem with lying to yourself."

"It's a side-effect of having to deal with you constantly. Like a disease that wears off on me. Soon I'll be blushing all the time, and stomping my feet, and pointing angrily at things." She laughs and he smirks. "You laugh now, but it's getting scarier from here on out, Granger."

"Well, my plan *has* always been to ruin your life."

"It's working."

Day: 1571; Hour: 9

Lupin waits while her eyes scan down the list of casualties. Some are familiar names from Hogwarts and missions, though no one she really knows. She finds several that could possibly be people she has worked with, but she doesn't know either the first or last name to be sure. She feels increasingly guilty about this each time she sees a name and has to wonder. She will have to ask Harry about Toad and Sam, and stop in at P&P to see if one of the six Harolds is Lavender's boyfriend. The only name she really knows is Tonks, though Lupin had told her it wasn't the full list yet, so she can only hope.

A small, dark part of her knows that there aren't many people to worry for beyond Harry's Alive List anyway. There just isn't many of them left at all, but she tries to shove the thought down before it can take her over. There are still a lot of names on this list, people who mean the world to other people, and the parchment feels heavy

in her hands.

"I'm sorry...about Tonks. She--" She would miss Tonks. The easiness of her presence, the changing appearance that suited her mood, the clumsiness, the warmth. She would miss what she meant to Lupin.

Lupin waves his hand, not daring speech, and his eyes drop to the paper. She hands it back, watching the way his eyes dart down the lines, settling on one spot. On Tonks, she is sure. It hurts to see someone you love pressed between a jumble of strangers' names, representing their death. She remembers Justin, the three boxes, and taking up the sky. It should mean more. Every single one of them should have meant more.

She hands him her report from the battle, and he slides the list to the edge of his desk. She hadn't been able to sleep last night and she had to write her report three times. Her thoughts and emotions had been so jumbled, she kept forgetting it wasn't a journal entry.

"I heard you broke your wand."

"Yes. I taped it until I can get a new one. I'm pretty sure it's beyond repair."

"You'll only be able to use it for absolute emergencies now."

She opens her mouth to tell him it won't work at all, then snaps it shut with a click of her teeth. Hermione stares at him until her vision is blurred, and then blinks slowly. "Now? You're suspending me *now*?"

The corner of his mouth turns up, and then there's a small smile that doesn't fit the darkness under his eyes and the tired severity lining his forehead. "It's the agreed suspension, Hermione. A lot of Death Eaters were killed and captured the other night. We're getting information, locations from the new prisoners, and more and more are filling up the holding cells before Azkaban. There will be a team put together to actively search out the ones in hiding and who are on the run, but besides that..."

Her back slams against the back of the chair, her body rigid, and the world swims out of focus around her. She stares with wide, unblinking eyes, something winding tighter and tighter inside of her. Her chest trembles and something catches in her throat. "Wh-- Lupin, what are you saying?"

"There's nothing left for you to do. Hermione...the war is over."

All the air in her body leaves her, and she doesn't know what else to do but cry.

Forty-Nine

Day: 1571; Hour: 14

Hermione stands in the middle of the Ministry lobby in a swirl of people. There is yelling, cheers, laughter, and people rushing to leave work early. Celebrations have begun, and a boy is handing out free copies of the Prophet, bold lettering exclaiming the war's conclusion. The Minister is grinning on the front, waving to cheering people.

But Hermione also sees the two men scowling against the wall. She sees the woman drawing her wand, and tenses, only to watch her show it to her friend. She watches the reporter running toward a group of Aurors, and waits for the jets of color. She hears screaming, and has to stop herself from reaching for her wand. She sees a little girl crying, expecting the dance of an orange band as she is rushed to safety, but it's only her mother.

"It doesn't feel like it's over, huh?"

She glances over at Dean, at the patch covering his left eye, and she shakes her head. "No."

"But it is. They wouldn't have said it wasn't if it wasn't. You know Lupin's paranoia. If he thought there was even a little bit of a possibility, he would have never told us. We got them this time. We won." He sounds like he's trying to convince himself more than her. "Has it hit you yet?"

We won. *Won. Won?* Because it's over. Because they are still alive. "No."

Dean shoves a hand into his pocket. The left, so he can reach across for his wand with the right if he has to. And only if he absolutely has to, because he was there when they saved a fake Ron and were given post-war suspension. When Seamus died for her, when Seamus and Justin both died in a mission that was for nothing. When they helped to bring a Death Eater into the Order and exposed everything.

But they still won. Right? Won. Won. The word sounds and feels foreign. Does it make her a *winner*? *Over*, she tries. It's over.

She draws the books and pamphlets closer to her chest, *Living With Being a Survivor* peeking out from above *Why We Shouldn't Be Afraid to Seek Help*. There's

also a listing of funeral services in the pile, contact information for transitionists at St. Mungo's. The warmth of McGonagall's hug has left Hermione's skin, and she tells herself again - *it's over*.

"Time."

"Always."

Day: 1571; Hour: 16

She is back in the white house, one of the few left standing. Lupin had mentioned her Flooing to the Burrow, and when Hermione had remained silent, he had given her a Portkey and some searching look that flickered his gaze between eyeballs she didn't raise. He had given her another Portkey to the Ministry for when she decided she was ready. She just needs a little time to try and sort out her thoughts. To try and get rid of the shock that's making her head fuzzy.

She'll have to go to the Burrow tomorrow for a belated birthday at Molly's insistence. Two days from tomorrow she will leave the Burrow for her *home*. Lupin has told her they are moving her parents back then, and she doesn't even know what to do with herself at the thought of finally seeing them, hugging them, having them be solid shapes she can reach out and touch. Once she is able to move her eyes away from them, she will go to the library and get as many books as she can about the mind, prisoners of war, and ways to heal. She doesn't care how long it takes - she'll save Ron, in the way she failed to do before. She doesn't care if she has to research and fight for it every day for the next twenty years. She isn't going to lose her best friends. They are right in front of her, and no one can take them from her again.

She has nothing to pack. She has a few belongings at Harry's home, but if she would have died, it wouldn't have been more than two boxes. She is still wearing a set of pajamas from the hospital, her own shorts and Harry's shirt too stained and ruined to wear again. She keeps the orange strip from her father's old shirt, though, shoved into the bottom of the wand slot in her holster.

The book from her meeting sits on the counter, opened to the first chapter, but she's too busy staring out the window. Staring at nothing but coloring leaves and an old rubbish pit. The house is somehow scarier without any other occupants or the thickness of war. Everyone else has gone home to their own beds and family, and she is the one left to wait. She could go to the Burrow or back into the Muggle world, but she's not in the mindset to handle either. To handle much of anything at all. In her head it is the list of names, and she thinks tonight is when she will fall apart.

"Granger?"

She sucks in a breath, like waking from dreams. She pulls herself out of her thoughts, looking over her shoulder and into the living room "Yeah?"

She feels a little stupid because she isn't sure if she imagined his voice or not, and there is only silence to greet her. She sees him, though, walking out of the hall and into the living room, his eyes finding hers before dropping to the floor.

"Hi," she whispers, and winces at herself.

"Hey."

"What are you doing here?" This is a stupid question, because she had been there to watch his house burn to the ground, and he doesn't have anywhere to go either.

She wonders how that felt. If he could have even taken a moment to recognize what *exactly* was falling apart in the flames. She also wonders if he thought of it as a monument of his past with all its dark and light reminders, or he held it closer to him as the last of things that was his. Maybe it was something like her trunk, with memories now turned into the wisps of thoughts that will fade with nothing left to remind you of them. Something precious that other people might not understand, but that you did and couldn't care what they thought of it.

She's sorry that he lost it. She's sorry they lost a lot of things. More than she'd like to think about, but felt anyway because sometimes empty spaces can construct a giant that sits on your chest when you open up your palms to see what you managed to keep.

"I have a few things I have to take care of."

"Oh."

"I saw your pamphlets by the door. Are you leaving?" he asks, unclasping his cloak and walking to put it on the table.

"No. Not until tomorrow."

He nods, and she drops the pretense of reading, scratching her forehead. "Your water is boiling, Granger."

"What? Oh." She stands, moving toward the stove. "Are you happy?"

"Happy?" For a moment he looks haunted, through the gloss of tears covering her eyeballs before she blinks it all away.

"I think I should be happy. But I'm not."

He looks down at the floor when she glances back at him, his jaw clenching and his tongue sweeping his cheek. "Why aren't you happy?"

"I don't know. I try." She practiced smiles in the mirror not an hour before his arrival, like the memory of movement in her face could ease the emotion into her chest. "I just don't know how to feel. And I don't know where to go from here either."

"No one does."

"But the fact that everyone else feels the same way doesn't change how I feel right now."

He nods and looks up at her, taking the teapot from her hand and setting it down on a cool burner. "Maybe you should stop trying to feel anything, and just feel what you feel."

"I know. I know, but you know me."

"I do." He reaches out to turn off the stove. "Life is quick. Everything is fleeting. All we have in life are moments, Granger. You have to learn when to hold on and when to let go."

"Do you know when to?"

He shrugs a shoulder, reaching out a finger under the hem of her shirt to graze the skin of her hip. "I don't know. I do what I think is best for my life and I hope it works."

"And if it doesn't?"

"There's the fallout. And life starts all over again -- just in a different way."

She reaches out, skimming fingers up his forearm. Everything feels strange tonight, but she blames it on their lives now. On what they have been through, and on the dismissal that it's over when they all still feel punched in the gut and war-minded.

"Do you have anywhere to be tonight?" he asks, stepping forward, reaching out his other hand to thumb her bottom lip.

"No," she whispers.

"Good." He moves his hand to cup her head and kiss her, and she chastises herself for the flip in her stomach when he does.

I'm in love with you, Draco Malfoy. How's that for a fallout? She would like to ask, but it is not the time for that, and she doesn't know when it will be again.

He kisses her like he is trying to rob her air, pressing into her as he presses them back. She grips the sides of his neck, exploring his mouth before twining her tongue around his. Her hands move to travel all over him; under his shirt, over his head, down his back. He cups her bottom and pulls her against him, grinding himself against her stomach.

He pulls back fractionally, giving just enough space to yank her shirt over her head. His mouth is back on hers before the fabric clears her arms, and he leaves it there, too impatient to touch her skin instead. She pulls her one arm out, quickly moving it to rub his shoulder, and shakes her arm violently to get the rest of her shirt off. Draco's hands desert her stomach for her breasts at the movement, his tongue running along her bottom lip before dipping into her mouth. She reaches down to shove her hands under his shirt, the pads of her fingers feeling the rough hairs under his bellybutton, and his stomach tightens as he bucks forward. She goes down further to his belt, her hands shaky as she pulls the strap from the buckle.

She pulls her head away and drops it to his shoulder, his mouth finding her ear, trailing kisses to her neck to suck the skin. Her fingers work at his button and then his zipper, and she gets a glimpse of his tensing jaw and red mouth before she yanks his pants and boxers down to his knees. He pulls her up and toward him again, wiggling to get his trousers to his ankles to step out of them, rigid against her stomach.

"Draco."

"What?" He sounds as breathless as her.

She shakes her head, gripping the back of his neck. "I just felt like saying your name."

His lips pull back into a grin, a breath of laughter on her lips before he kisses her

back, keeping her trapped between himself and the counter. It's probably going to leave a bruise, she's digging in so hard, but she can't remember how to care. She pulls up his shirt, pulling harder when he doesn't take his arms away from her so she can remove it. He mutters something about there being too much clothing, and yanks it over his head himself, flinging it somewhere to his left before wrapping himself around her again.

He thrusts his tongue in and out of her mouth, and it takes her a second to catch on and follow, smoothing the sharper edge of need. His hands press into her skin, sliding up her back to unsnap her bra. He continues upward, wrapping his hands around her shoulders and leaving her mouth for her neck. She breathes heavily into the hair at the side of his head, deserting his chest and stomach to remove her bra herself, and he bends his head to kiss the top of each breast.

"I need..."

"What?" he whispers, deep and lost somewhere in her neck, his tongue moving gently over the small burn scar there. She feels powerless, but completely devoted to the sensation.

"You."

He groans and nips at her throat, raising his head to look at her. She doesn't think she'll ever get used to how he looks when he's turned on. There's something about the sight alone that makes her ready for more, let alone everything else he's so skilled at doing. She's always lost to how beautiful he can be, for her, in these moments.

She pushes up onto her toes, kissing him twice, three times. Then he's back from wherever he had been to think just then, and takes what he wants from her. His blunt nails scrape down her back to her bottom, hoisting her up against him, and she wraps her legs tightly around his waist. His length presses against where she needs him the most, but her pajamas block any success there. His mouth burns a path across her cheek, the hair on his face chafing her skin. She reaches up to rub her palms against the growth he has acquired during his hospital stay, searching for his mouth.

"You can shave it later."

"If you're lucky," she pants out, and he pinches the back of her leg before kissing her again.

She presses her legs tighter around his hips as he begins to walk, and he wraps his arms around her for more support. She slides her hands up his shoulders, his neck, and buries them in his hair. He moans when she curls her fingers, pulling his hair tight in her fists, and kisses her harder. She yelps against his mouth when her shoulder hits painfully against the frame of the door.

"Shit. Sorry." He apologizes in a rush, keeping his head forward now, and she takes the opportunity to rediscover the sensitive areas of his neck.

"Lightening bolts."

"What?"

"Bing…well, I guess they don't really bi--"

"Shut up, Granger." He only moans when she bites his neck in retaliation, and she smiles at the hum beneath her lips.

He sets her down in the closest bedroom and pulls away from her, taking a seat on the edge of the bed. He holds out his hand, wiggling his fingers at her, and pulls her between his legs when she takes it. He's slow to pull her pajama pants down, and then has the nerve to stop when they're low enough for him to know she's not wearing any knickers.

Draco looks up to give her a wicked smile that makes her heart palpitate in a very unhealthy way, and leans forward to press his mouth to her stomach. He grabs her hips, keeping her still when she starts to squirm, kissing and flicking his tongue against her skin. He grazes his teeth to the band of her pants, sucking along the edge as he slides his hands down to hook his fingers in the waist. She runs her fingers through his hair, looking down at him, and feeling strangely affectionate. The moment feels more personal to her than she thinks he could possibly realize, though she doesn't know why.

He pulls them down, his mouth following the trail over her pelvis and thighs until he can bend no further, and he leaves her to kick them off her ankles. He slides his hands back up her thighs, pressing a finger into her, and she sucks in a breath, swaying forward. She looks down at him, at the darkness of his eyes as he sucks his finger into his mouth.

"God," she whispers, reaching down from his hair to cup his face and kiss him.

He grabs the back of her thighs, pulling her forward to straddle his lap, and

tearing himself from her mouth in favor of her breasts. She would like to tell him that she does not need any more foreplay, *please*, but it feels too good to resist, his hands kneading and his mouth hot. She grinds down against him, wondering how she should go about getting him inside of her, but this seems initiative enough for him.

He falls back onto the bed, bringing her with him, and she seeks out his mouth. She runs her hand down his torso, but he rolls them over before she finds what she wants.

"Impatient tonight?"

"Yes," she admits. "Patience later."

He laughs huskily, and it's one of the best sounds she's ever heard. He nods his chin toward the headboard, and she props herself on her elbows to crawl back under him. She kisses his shoulder, watching his back flex with his movements, and the rise of his bum over the crease of his back.

He stops her with a hand to her ribs, and leans down to kiss her. She loves this. Kissing him and being with him -- even when she's angry with him, she loves this. No matter what happens, or how this ends, she knows she will not regret ever starting this with him. He has made her feel things she didn't know she could, physically and emotionally, and she could never find it within herself to ask for a second of it to not have happened. He is her stronghold, her battle, her ally. He is the moment she holds onto, even after she lets him go. Every cocky, brooding, annoying, angry, sarcastic inch of him.

He rolls them over again, his hand fumbling blindly for the headboard before gripping it and pulling them up. He leans against it, pulling her mouth to his, a hand under her arm to pull her off his lap for a moment, and another on himself to guide him in. She closes her eyes, moaning with him as he grips her hip and she sinks down, seated fully on top of him.

A harsh breath against her face makes her open her eyes, releasing the breath she had been holding as well. He gives up his control, letting go of her hip and raising open hands. She entwines her fingers with his, feeling the strength under his palms as she lifts herself and then sinks down again. She starts slow, because she feels too much in this moment that she can't voice, but that she wants to show him somehow.

He leans his head forward when she comes back down, and she rests her

forehead against his, staring into deep grey until it's all she can see. They exchange breath, and when she tightens her hands on his, he tightens right back, lifting his hips to meet her.

"I love you, just so--" And this is when he lifts his chin, kissing the words from her mouth.

Day: 1572; Hour: 11

The sun shines red on her eyelids but she does not wish to open them, afraid of having to actually remove herself from the bed. Draco had kept her up all night, only a few stolen hours of sleep before one of them would wake the other up again. Her body is so exhausted that it feels like it must have only been ten minutes ago that she last woke him up, his pace maddeningly slow as he did all the things she liked. He had given her a long, slow, deep kiss that stole everything from her but him, and then, *Happy Birthday*, and he laughed at the width of her eyes and grin.

She finally opens her eyes, frowning at the empty side of the bed. His body indent is still in the sheets and pillow. It smells like him too, she notices, when she buries her head in the spot his had been. There's a loud bang from somewhere outside the door, a string of curses, and then several more bangs. Hermione jumps, launching herself from the bed and wrapping the sheet around her. She grabs her wand from the bedside table, useless, and checks both sides of the hall before running toward the kitchen.

Draco is red-faced and scowling at one of the cabinets, a pot raised in his hand, and his wand in the other. "Draco?"

She tries to gain control over her breathing and heart, and lowers her wand.

"There's a rat."

She stares at him, biting her lips, but she can't keep the laughter from her voice. "Didn't you live in the dungeons?"

"We never had rats." He sneers at her, slowly lowering his rat-crushing weapons. He drops the pot back on the counter, raising his hand to his now scruff-free face and rubbing at his cheek.

"Let it be. We--"

"I'm not having rats in my house, Granger. I've dealt with your house-elf rants,

but rats is where I draw the line."

Hermione glances up at the cabinet and then back to his wandering eyes. She sniffs at him, and pulls the sheet tighter. "Your house?"

"Yes. Lupin decided to…*gift* me this spectacular shit-hole for turning my house into a pile of wreckage. Thankfully, I have another home. Unfortunately, my mother also lives there. Between the rats and the hovering, I can hardly decide."

She files that information away for later, and feels oddly like she just discovered a bit of treasure she'll keep proudly and away from the sight of others. It's where she keeps all the things he's trusted her enough to tell her, and also the things he doesn't know he tells her, like how his voice softened on *mother*.

Hermione laughs, shrugging, and his eyes catch her shoulders. "It's not bad. You have to fix it up, though."

Color. The only bits of it are scattered fabric and the watercolors still hanging in the living room. Scrubbing, too, for the dirt and dust, and the places where blood stains the floor. Holes to patch, things to replace, and maybe leaving all the windows open for a week to blow out the way the air seems thicker.

"I was rather content to watch it rot." He steps carefully around the puddle of tea on the floor, and hesitates with his wand over the table before he sets it down.

She watches the predatory edge to his eyes and step with caution, but she still leans into him when he grabs her arms. "It has potential."

"You see potential in everything."

"I think it could be beautiful."

He snorts, bending to brush his lips up the curve of her shoulder. "That's a lot of work, Granger."

"So? Fix the roof, maybe some new carpeting, some furniture. You definitely have to paint. It's always bothered me, the blankness." Ever since she first came to this house with Lupin. When she walked down the hall and saw Draco out of the prison cell and in her world, on her side.

"It would take years to--"

"I'll help."

His lips pause, the heat of his breath. His fingers are curling harder into her arms, but she doesn't think he notices. *Bum, bum, bum, bum, bum*. "No yellow." *Ba-dumb, ba-dumb*.

She smiles, skimming her fingers over the hair at the back of his head. "What, green?"

"Of course."

"Red."

"Then I'll have to get elves so I can complete the whole Christmas look." She tugs his hair for the sarcasm, and he bites her ear in response.

"I like Christmas. Red and green. It makes me happy. Maybe I'll paint your room pink..." She trails off when he raises his head to glare at her. "No? Not pink?"

"I think I'll go with blue." She blushes, and he smirks in the kisses he presses to her jaw before pulling up to look at her.

"I'm going to the Burrow." She tells this more to his searching hands than to him.

"Right now?"

"Soon. Molly wants to do this whole...belated birthday thing." She shifts on her feet, and she thinks the awkwardness must radiate up from her blood, through his hands, and into his knowledge.

"Oh."

"I have to Portkey to the Ministry, and then Floo... If you had been there before, I would ask you to Appar--"

"I'll take you."

"You've been there?"

"No, I was just going to bring us out into the middle of the ocean, drop you in it, and Apparate back here before I fell in myself."

She purses her lips at him, and he reaches up to grab the tangle of sheets in her fist. He yanks on them and she clutches them tighter. His eyebrow hikes, his eyes meeting hers as he yanks harder. "We already covered what I would do if you murdered me."

"Right. Slippers." The sheet gives way, and his eyes rake down her body as she clasps her hands. He looks over her shoulder toward the dining table.

"Will you stay?"

"Here?"

"When you bring me to the Burrow... Will you stay?"

His eyes snap back to hers, and the intensity she finds there makes her fidget. She reaches up a finger, running it down his nose, and his fingers clench around her hips. He shrugs a shoulder, pulling her against him. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll stay."

Day: 1572; Hour: 12

"I think I'm going to write a letter to the Finnigans every year. Just to tell them what I'm doing with my life. Do you think they'll like that?"

She glares at him when he shoves the box of crackers between his side and the armrest. "If they reply back with several hexes charmed to the parchment, no. How the hell should I know, Granger?"

She frowns, plopping next to him on the ugly couch, securing the towel to her head. "I just thought it might bring them...some sort of comfort. To know that a part of him lives on. Lives through someone else."

"So what happens when you do nothing for a year? When you get too busy to save the world. What will you tell them then?"

"I--"

"You're setting yourself up for failure, Granger. Because no matter what you do, or how great you make your life, you're never going to feel like it's good enough to make up for *his* life. For any of their lives."

"That's not-"

"Yes, it is. You're never going to feel like you made it *worth* it, Granger. Your friends are still dead and you have to accept that. It's not about the life they could have had, it's about the life *you* have. We're fucked up enough. There's a reason the Ministry sent letters to the families about how to deal with us. No loud sounds, no sneaking up, no *quick movements*. We're all screwed. We're all screwed up in the head now and everyone knows it. The most we--"

"I'm trying to be happy," she whispers, and there's something heavy against her chest again. He stares at her long enough for her to feel awkward.

"And some days you're going to be angry, and other days you're going to have one of your breakdowns. You'll hear and see shit that isn't there, you'll throw curses at trees, and you're still going to be afraid. You're going to be afraid of even more shit now. That's not going away. We can't ever be normal after this, and you're not going to have some brilliant life when you wake up tomorrow. But it doesn't mean you're wasting it. It doesn't make their sacrifices mean any less."

"I know." Her voice cracks, and she clears her throat. He leans back in the couch, his shoulder pressing to hers. "I know. Nothing is... I have to make it worth it for myself, though. I'm...accepting that it's never going to be good enough to make up for them being gone. But I'll never stop trying to make it good enough for me. That's what I mean. And that's for them, too. It's all I can give them."

There are different kinds of losses. Some you can take like a collision that knocks you down, and after awhile, you stand and take a step, another, another. You leave it behind there, something in you changed, and it's something you look back upon with a sadness that rages forward but reaches you gently and gentler the further you go. A darkness you can't help but always sometimes search for in the madness behind you, but where grief is eased by years to become something wistful, with nostalgia and regret.

Sometimes there isn't a loss you can accept and move on from. Where *loss* is some underwhelming assembly of letters to describe what has been ripped out and stolen from you. Sometimes it is something you live with, like a knife to the chest that you can't pull out without dying from it. You walk, you breathe, you live, and you carry it around with you; an ache in the chest, a hole filled with sharp, hard things, and an emptiness hollowed out around the heart.

But you live. And if you try really hard, you can find some peace, and you can carry the beautiful things with you too.

She lifts her chin. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"The future. Hap--"

"Today I'm going to suffer through the Weasleys. I might buy a television. Tomorrow I'm going to see my mother. At some point I'm going to start fixing this house. I might even invite Potter to help, as long as there is an abundance of alcohol. Considering the events of last time, I gather I'm going to see you naked in several colors and shag you in every room. One morning I might wake to being suffocated by slippers. One day I might fall into a war mentality and kill you while you're planting marijuana in my backyard aga--"

"How many times do I have to tell you, it wasn't--"

"I might buy some clothes. At some point--"

"I meant the real future. Beyond the next couple of weeks."

"There are some semblance of plans, but I know about as much as you do for that, Granger. Nothing."

"And you're okay with that?"

"It's fucking glorious."

She bites her cheek, unwrapping the towel from her hair with a shrug. "I guess we'll figure it out."

"Eventually." The cracker pauses on its way to his mouth, and she glances up to meet his eyes, realizing that she had been staring at it rather intensely.

His eyes narrow and he pops it into his mouth, chewing slowly. She smiles sweetly at him, and his eyes squint even more. "You know what would make me happy right now?"

"You'll have to earn it." She gives him a look and he reads it clearly. "Jesus, not that. Are you already trying to kill me? As irresistible as I must be, Granger, the last twenty-four hou--"

"Irresistible? I had no intentions on that anyway. I simply thought--"

"Mhm. I see your still unnamed 'blood pressure illness' is acting up again."

"That's because you make me angry."

"Is this supposed to be something new?"

"Give me the crackers, Malfoy."

"You have to earn them, I said. You have to work for happi--"

She dives for them.

Hour: One

She can hear his footsteps behind her, and then his...shoes by her leg. She can't remember him in any footwear outside of his boots. The glass door slides farther away from her, and he takes the spot it leaves open, dangling his legs out the door with hers. She looks up at his face, his eyes staring into the trees. She almost can't believe it. That the war is over and that he's still here.

She can still hear the echoes of his voice in her ear, strained and choked, and begging for something more than the moment could have given them. He had said it on the crest of a goodbye, but it had only fueled her more. Like a second heart that formed over a year ago, behind her own, throbbing those emotions into her blood with every frantic beat.

She had tried to fight it, to ignore it, had felt him try to rip it out of her himself. Sometimes it feels like losing, and other times she is positive they have won. She doesn't know the name for what they are, or how it happened, or where they'll go. She doesn't have a clue, but she thinks this might be okay, because she has him. Somehow, in this monster of war that has stolen so much from her, it gave her back this. The one thing she thought it never could.

She looks over at him, that spark of grey, and grins wildly. It's the insane grin, the pleased grin that freaks him out and that he doesn't like. But she thinks maybe he likes it anyway, because he shakes his head and turns his face away, but she can see the corner of his mouth hitch and then rise, rise.

She looks down at her boots, at her knees, and then up at the trees. At the colors swinging across the sky, shivering at the chill wind that promises the coming of winter. She would be lying if she said she isn't still scared. She would be lying if she said she knows what to do with herself at all. *We're all scared, Granger.*

"Where do we go now?"

He waits on silence, because he knows she doesn't mean the literal destination. She doesn't mean the Burrow, the birthday dinner, the crazy dining table shoved full of red hair. She means the casualty list, her dead friends, her need to draw her wand at a flicker of shadows. She means moving on, and healing up, and learning how to live without war. She means him, and her, and the stone in her bark. She means the survivors, and her parents, and the entire world. She means the future. That big, rushing, open space of time, and wounds, and possibilities. She means about not wasting it, about life, about choices, about freedom. She means after the fallout.

He shrugs a shoulder, sniffs, and pushes himself off the ledge and to his feet. The wind snags his hair, blowing it up into dancing strands. The sky is a light pink and orange beyond his shoulders, stuck in that moment where it could be sunrise or sunset, but it's beautiful and perfect all the same. He grabs her hips, and his eyes are like the stones again, beneath the running water in her backyard. For a second she is a child; soaked in her Sunday dress, twirling, twirling, *twirling* as the world moved on and she laughed, cheeks stretching in the sun.

"Anywhere we want."

She grabs his shoulders, and he hauls her off the edge and to her feet, grunting like it takes a lot to do so. She glares at him and he smirks, his body relaxed as he tugs her against him and warms her cold lips with his own. His thumb skates her cheekbone, always the one with the scar, and his smile is crooked when she grins at him.

When does life begin again?

After the fallout, when you wake up, when you realize that you are still alive. Do you shake out your bones, do you memorize the pulses of your blood? Do you ever stop feeling like you're still in it, like you'll never get out of it?

Maybe you hide from it. Maybe you keep it hidden under your skin, because it's easier than facing it, because facing it is acknowledging what you have lost to get there. Maybe you throw it away, because you're afraid, and it might kill you or restore you, but you don't know. You *can't* know.

Maybe it starts when the smoke begins to clear from a battle, when dawn lights up the faces of her side. Maybe it's when Draco wakes up in a hospital bed instead of never waking up at all. When Ron will finally realize that she is really there, and when Harry finds that he no longer has to be a hero because he has finished what he was born to do. When George flips the sign to Open on his and his brother's shop,

when Dean paints a face of someone he loves that isn't dead, when Lavender climbs her mountain in Asia.

Life is a circle. It is a war. It builds, climaxes, ebbs out of the fallout, and then builds again. Every night someone goes to sleep to the end of the world, but one morning, they wake up. They shake out their bones, they realize they have survived. They begin again, that human struggle for peace, that desperate reach for happiness.

Hermione thinks it begins now. Draco's fingers twisted in the fabric at the back of her shirt, as they stand there like the last solid structure in the entire world. She knows that the world can never be a place that finds true peace - but *she* can, *they can*. The war is over, and they have won. Life stretches out before them, waiting for them to make it worth it. Some elusive happiness there to overwhelm them.

And Hermione *knows*, with the Burrow waiting for them, and Draco's cold nose against her cheek, his breath warm on her neck, that *this* is the beginning.

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